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8-PAGE
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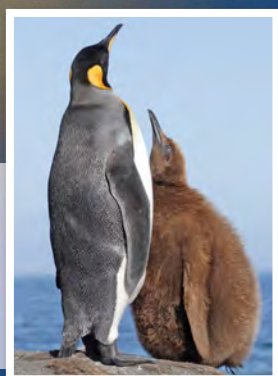
Black-headed
& Bonaparte's
Gulls



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COMMON CRANES BY NICK UPTON (WWW.THEGREATCRANEPROJECT.ORG.UK)



Contents



I have fond memories of seeing my first Common Crane in Britain. I was 17 and on a family trip to north Norfolk when we heard a rumour of one feeding in riverside fields on private

land. Working out where it might be visible from a public road, my brother and I eventually found the bird – and what an impressive sight it was. Still an official rarity at the time, I recorded the details in my notebook, crudely sketched it (see pages 82-83 for more on this subject) and submitted my first-ever description to the Rarities Committee.

It was some years before I next saw the species in Britain, an indication of just how rare a visitor it used to be, but cranes then settled in small numbers elsewhere in Norfolk. Having done so under their own steam, an obvious question is why reintroduce more when the species has already established itself? Given the significant funding and resources needed for such projects, it's a fair point, and the same case might also be made

against other reintroductions such as White-tailed Eagle and Osprey.

But there are actually very good reasons for doing so, as this month's cover story reveals (pages 36-43). I have been sceptical of the value of some of them previously, but modified my view over time. The presence of released birds in the wider countryside may jar with 'purist' birders in the short term, but who can really argue, for example, that several generations on it was a bad idea to re-establish Red Kites in the Chilterns? And think of the iconic and educational value too of the Ospreys at Rutland Water and the White-tailed Eagles on Mull, not to mention the significant benefits to rural tourism.

On a number of levels, reintroductions of native birds are justifiable and should be welcomed. Without a helping hand, many of the species involved are destined to remain rare, teetering on the edge of their range here, or lost forever as part of our avifauna.

Dominic Mitchell

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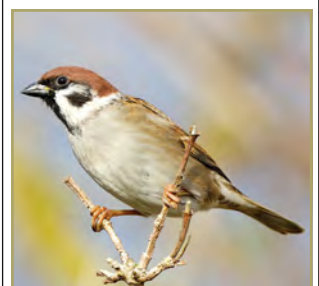


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Turning a new stone

Birders may have become accustomed to Turnstones turning from their traditional food of strandline invertebrates to scavenging fish 'n' chips on the seafront and even entering the odd restaurant, but there can be few who have had the species actively feeding on their bird table.

However, this winter a garden in Vestmannaeyjar, in the Icelandic archipelago of the same name, was host to not just one, but three Turnstones (though two were a little camera-shy). The town is in the centre of the Icelandic island rarity hot-spot of Heimaey, so is used to the occasional presence of unusual birds – but in the midst of the cold season it is oddness of behaviour as much as of occurrence that is as likely to provide the birding interest.

The first bird turned up on or around 12 January, and stayed for most of the month, eking out a chill-defying existence on fat balls put out for the Starlings, Snow Buntings and redpolls. It was joined by its compatriots a few days later, and the species apparently showed a particular liking for *gravlax* – the local Nordic delicacy of raw salmon cured with sugar, salt and dill. ■



FINDER'S REPORT



DERMOT BREEN

Slaty-backed Gull: Killybegs, Co Donegal, 17-18 January 2015

2014 was an awful year for rarities in the north of Ireland, bar the Pacific Diver in Tyrone in January and February, and the winter of 2014-15 had not started promisingly.

I was off for two weeks over Christmas and spent the whole period rarity hunting, but had come up with the square root of nothing in real terms. I spent five of those days at Killybegs in Co Donegal, but despite the promise of the large numbers of gulls present, my total was a mere four Iceland Gulls. This might sound like a lot for British birders, but for the gull hot-spot of Killybegs it was miserly.

A series of storms then hit the north-west of Ireland, and intensified during the week of 12 January. I didn't think they had originated from far enough north, but anything already out there could easily have been dragged into Killybegs. That was my theory so my companion Majella and I planned to go there on Saturday morning and stay over until Sunday, but a cold snap meant we had to travel up on Friday after work; I was

a little disappointed that most of the fishing fleet was obviously out when we arrived.

On the Saturday morning we had breakfast overlooking the harbour, but even in the half light it was obvious gull numbers were very low, and we were in no rush to finish. The weather forecasters had got it right – it was the coldest wind imaginable. We drove the short distance from the hotel to the small slipway, and got out. Once we were scanning with our bins, Majella immediately found an interesting gull on the offshore wooden jetty, but said nothing. I got the scope out and checked a few spots around the harbour, then scoped the jetty and saw the third gull in. “Wowser!”

Majella said: “It's that third gull in isn't it? I thought it was a funny Lesser Black-backed Gull with pink legs.” I let Majella look at it through the scope and she asked what I thought it was. I replied: “Well it looks like a Slaty-backed Gull.” Of course, getting from a gull that looks like that species to a firm identification is not an easy task.

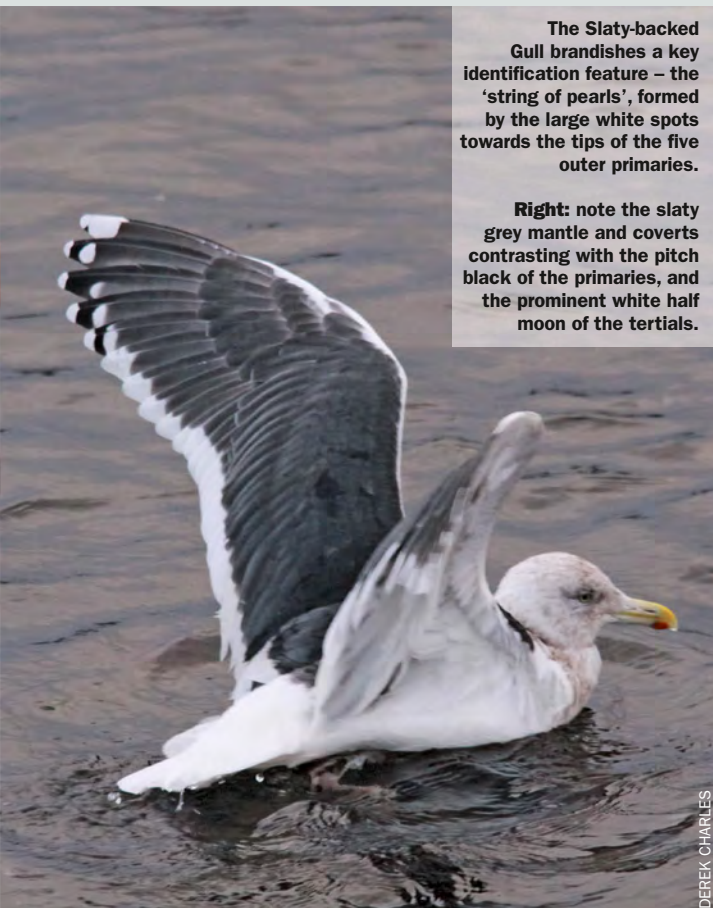
I dispatched Majella for two loaves of bread while I kept an eye on the ‘funny Lesser Black-

back’, but I couldn't note any additional features as it promptly sat down and went to sleep. I had no experience of Slaty-backed Gull and my limited knowledge totalled seeing photos of the few previous European records, and images of vagrants from Newfoundland. A few things stuck

in my mind: bubble gum-pink legs, a broad white trailing edge to the secondaries, mantle as dark as a Lesser Black-backed and – yes – the magic ‘string of pearls’ (the white subterminal spots on the outer primaries)!

Majella returned, and we threw half a loaf off the side of the pier.





The Slaty-backed Gull brandishes a key identification feature – the ‘string of pearls’, formed by the large white spots towards the tips of the five outer primaries.

Right: note the slaty grey mantle and coverts contrasting with the pitch black of the primaries, and the prominent white half moon of the tertials.



The gull took off immediately and pitched straight into the middle of a larid feeding frenzy! However, photographing a gull in poor light with an old camera was not an easy job, as the bird kept launching itself at every slice thrown in. I could see the string of pearls but I couldn't

photograph it to see the exact pattern on the wing. It took 15 minutes in the freezing wind and sleet to get the wing in focus, and then a heavy shower forced us back to the hotel to take stock, get warm and see what Google had to say.

It appeared that – mad as it

seemed – we really did have a Slaty-backed Gull. The one thing I wasn't happy with was how pink the legs were; I was expecting a stronger colour. Bearing in mind this one caveat, I rang a couple of friends while Majella managed to text and email a few of the photos to others.

We headed back out again and found the gull dozing on a nearby roof. The sun came out briefly behind us and, with the bird on a whitish roof, the bubble gum-pink leg colour was more apparent. I rang Dave Allen and texted around that I was happy to put the news out as a ‘probable’ Slaty-backed Gull. Majella managed to upload a digiscoped photo she had taken to Twitter, and shortly after Seamus Feeny rang to say that the ‘Sligo crew’ were on their way.

I spent the following 90 minutes feeding the gull a total of seven loaves, even luring it onto the small jetty and rewarding it with a slice all to itself. I took 700 photos (600 of which were later deleted).

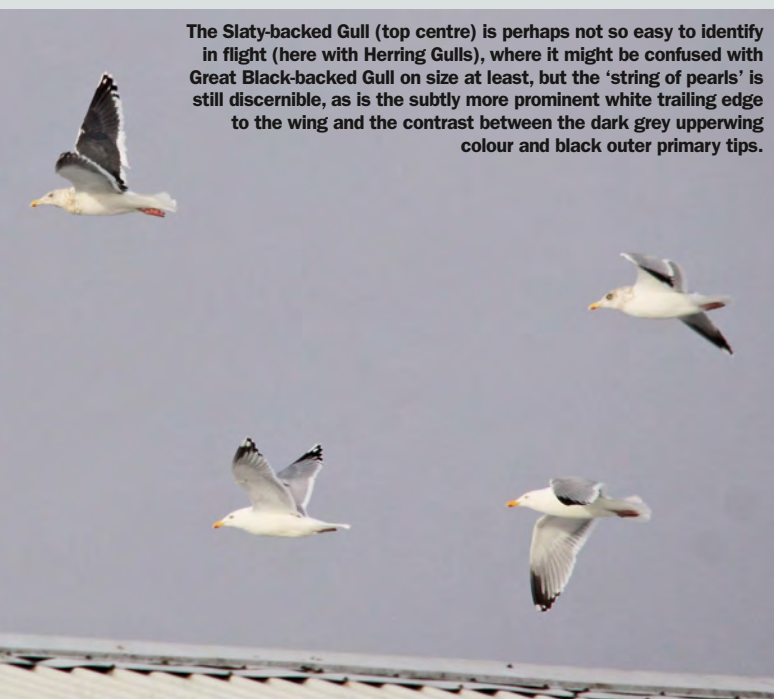
Seamus, Paul and Declan arrived in a screech of tyres and couldn't believe the bird was only feet away. Declan had a gull book with him and nothing in that put me off the

idea it was a Slaty-backed.

The next morning around 12 Irish birders plus a car-load from Norfolk had brilliant views of the bird sitting on the pier and the jetty before, without warning, it got up at 10 am and flew off strongly up the estuary, never to be seen again.

Slaty-backed Gull wasn't high up on the list I thought I might find at Killybegs, but Tom Cuffe's brilliant find in Galway last year put the species on the radar in Ireland. I hope that it is re-found somewhere in Ireland – and if not here then hopefully on a dump in England! ■

The Slaty-backed Gull (top centre) is perhaps not so easy to identify in flight (here with Herring Gulls), where it might be confused with Great Black-backed Gull on size at least, but the ‘string of pearls’ is still discernible, as is the subtly more prominent white trailing edge to the wing and the contrast between the dark grey upperwing colour and black outer primary tips.



STATS & FACTS

First recorded: Rainham Marshes, Gtr London/Essex, and other sites in south Essex, 13 January-26 February 2011

Last recorded: Galway City, Co Galway, 8 February 2014

Previous British and Irish records: 0 (the above records are both still pending)

Mega rating: ★★★★★

Duck makes Scilly number one

A new drake American Black Duck on the feted Isles of Scilly has made it the most likely place to see the species in Britain.



In flight, identification of adult American Black Duck (second from left, with Mallards) is fairly straightforward, with the purple-ish speculum lacking any obvious white borders, the dark body contrasting with the paler head, the slight greenish tinge to the yellow bill and the dark tail.

American Black Duck: Samson and Tresco, Scilly, from 19 January 2015

THE arrival of a drake American Black Duck on Samson, Scilly, on 19th means that the archipelago has become the best place in Britain to find and see the species, after eight previous records there (and eight in Cornwall). The very brief bird was associating with Mallards, a close congener which the species often joins when arriving as a vagrant.

Lost for a week, the bird then reappeared on Tresco, again with Mallards, where it remained in the area of

Abbey Pool into February, though it was frequently mobile and appeared often in nearby Pentle Bay.

The history of Abbey Pool with the species doesn't just involve attracting the highest number of vagrants. From 1978 to 1984, an adult female which first arrived in a pair on 27 October 1976 successfully raised at least 29 chicks to fledging, with hybrids present in the area for most of the same period. No one knows exactly where these hybrid birds went, but it is possible that they were

eventually bred out via the local Mallard population, ubiquitous in Scilly as almost everywhere else in Britain.

The islands aren't the only place to have harboured hybrids for the unwary birder – mixed pairs have also occurred in Aber, Caernarfonshire (1980-84), Highland (1981-82) and Lothian (1985-86). However, Scilly has produced the most hybrids as well as the most lasting pairing. In the past, pairs of the species have arrived together, so perhaps it is not beyond the bounds of feasibility that pure

examples of the species might one day breed here naturally. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded:

Mullinavat, Kilkenny, 13 February 1954.

Last recorded: Mainland, Shetland, 11-18 June 2013.

Previous British records: 39

Previous Irish records: 16

Mega rating: ★★★



The American Black Duck (top right) remained elusive during its stay, with retreating flight views being the order of the day as it flew between Abbey Pool and Pentle Bay.



Previous American Black Ducks on Scilly included this female in 2005, which was present from December 2004 until May of the following year, and which also returned in spring 2006.

Pacific just passing through

A Pacific Golden Plover at a popular Lincolnshire site proved to be a one-lunchtime wonder.

GRAHAM CATLEY (PEWITBLOGSPOT.COM)



The Pacific Golden Plover (centre, among Northern Lapwings, and with European Golden Plover, far right) remained at some distance during its somewhat brief visit, but could be picked out by its smaller size, yellow tinge on the upperparts and more prominent pale yellow supercilium.

Pacific Golden Plover: Alkborough Flats, Lincolnshire, 29 January 2015

AS many birders know, there are plenty of wintering plovers on the grasslands of Britain. Confronted with about 3,000 European Golden Plovers and 2,000 Northern Lapwings on a grass field near the Trent Falls hide at Alkborough Flats, Lincolnshire birder Neil Drinkall certainly did well to pull out a subtly different Pacific Golden Plover from the pack.

The bird in question was

in winter plumage, and showed a daintier jizz overall, with longer legs. A brighter, more 'golden' tinge than most of the Europeans was also notable, as was the hint of a dark spot on the ear coverts. A broad yellowy-buff supercilium also helped it stand out from most of the Europeans.

Owing to the distance of around 500 m, the bird was initially put out at around 12.20 pm as an 'American/Pacific'. The finding of the bird is even more

impressive owing to the poor visibility and coldness of the day concerned.

Once fully identified, the plover did not linger long, flying off with most of the rest of the flock at about 1 pm, just before an impending snow storm, never to be seen again. The subsequent non-appearance of the bird should be enough to encourage all birders to scrutinise their local golden plover flocks in the hope of refinding this eastern gem. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded: Epsom, Surrey, 12 November 1870.

Last recorded: Breydon Water, Norfolk, 19 October 2013.

Previous British records: 84

Previous Irish records: 13

Mega rating: ★★★



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FINDER'S REPORT

Scoter hot-spot scores again

ON Thursday 8 January, Davey Farrar was on his way out to Reenard for a spot of 'gulling' when he stopped at Mountain Stage, near Rossbeigh, Co Kerry, towards the south-western tip of Ireland. He saw a small Common Scoter flock, one of which showed a lot of yellow on the bill. Deteriorating weather and distance made detail impossible to see, and on his return journey the bird was not visible at all.

He did, however, ring me and describe what he had seen. I took notice, as Davey has found a long list of rarities in Co Kerry of late, including co-finding the Stejneger's Scoter at Rossbeigh in 2011 (see *Birdwatch* 227: 50-51).

We both went back the following morning and searched for the scoter flock. At first, we looked for just any scoter, with gale force winds and driving rain making the task extremely difficult. We finally located about 60-70 scoter about 200 m from the original site, almost obscured by the swell, mist and driving rain.

We set up our scopes, and several minutes later we both latched onto the 'yellow-billed' bird. It was quickly lost in the mist and waves, however. Many scoter were regularly diving and others resting, while being thrown around like corks.

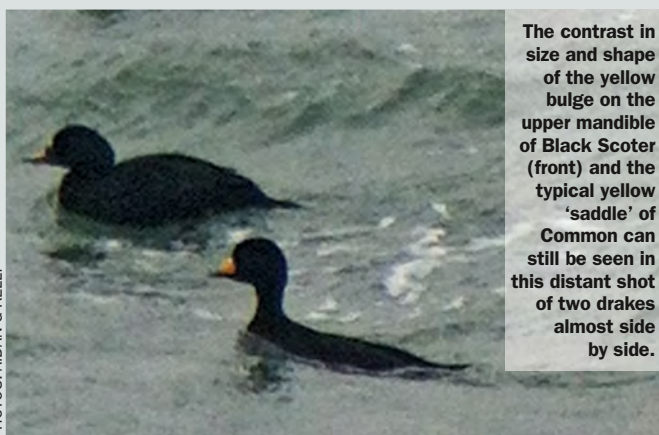
We found a sheltered niche a little way up the cliff which allowed occasional views of the flock in the huge swell, but wind-shake on the scopes and constant rain only allowed frustrating one- and two-second glimpses, often minutes apart.

It was, however, an immediately striking-looking yellow bill. Straining through the murk to relocate the bird each time was accompanied by a desperate soundtrack along the lines of "Is that it? ... no. That one maybe? ... no, JAYSUS! That's the one! Damn, gone again ... " and so forth.

We had been on the cliff for more than three hours, and had built up a picture of the bird. We were becoming convinced that we were looking at a Black Scoter. Face on, the large area of yellow on the bill looked curved and even, like a small

Michael O'Clery and Davey Farrar had to take real care in identifying a first for Ireland as the rain fell and the waves crashed.

Black Scoter: Near Rossbeigh, Co Kerry, from 8 January 2015



PHOTOS: AIDAN G KELLY

The contrast in size and shape of the yellow bulge on the upper mandible of Black Scoter (front) and the typical yellow 'saddle' of Common can still be seen in this distant shot of two drakes almost side by side.

yellow 'ball' stuck on its forehead, with no hint of a small bump on the bill's upper profile. There seemed to be a neat black border below the orange, joining with a distinct and even black tip at the end of the bill.

We became increasingly sure there was also a subtle difference in 'jizz' – a stockier build to the neck and head, making it a bit 'chunkier-looking' than the nearby drake Common Scoters. The head and neck looked slightly more akin to a Surf Scoter than a Common in profile. Strangely, even with the brief views we were getting, we could see that the bird appeared to be regularly calling to other flock members nearby.

I returned to the car to get my camera, and attempted to take photos during a brief lull in the rain. Even with a 420 mm lens, the best we could do was for Davey to stay on the scope to announce: "Up

now! Third bird from the left of the group of eight," while I aimed the lens and hoped for the best.

Shortly after, the weather took a serious turn for the worse, and the flock disappeared into the rain as it drifted further out, and visibility decreased to around 100 metres. We waited, but the short-range forecast was for worsening conditions so, cramped and soaked, we retreated to the car.

We were now seriously considering this as a Black Scoter – a first for Ireland! The deteriorating weather and impending darkness meant we would be unlikely to see the bird again that day. We knew that some Irish claims of Black Scoter had turned out to be Common with largely yellow bills, so we decided to go home and make a few calls, while I checked my photos.

Of the 40 or so images, just

three showed the bird, but with little detail. I forwarded these to Killian Mullarney and Eric Dempsey, both of whom were encouraging about the identification as a Black Scoter. Killian commented: "It is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion on the evidence of the photos alone, but from what I can see they do indeed suggest a Black, and your impression of it looking good in the field is very significant."

The worry that this might turn out to be a hybrid or aberrant scoter prompted us to trawl the net for such examples. However, field impressions of the appearance of the bill and differing jizz of the bird were overriding our doubts. We eventually felt confident enough to announce the bird as a Black Scoter, with the proviso that it was "a bird showing all the characters of Black Scoter, and none of the characters of a hybrid/aberrant bird". With breaks in the weather the following day, much better photos started to emerge.

Birders from all over Ireland made the journey to Rossbeigh in the following days, and most saw the bird first time, though some needed a second attempt for satisfactory views. The small scoter flock at Rossbeigh usually wandered up to mile or so across the bay, so it was fortunate indeed that the flock remained within a small area close to the cliff near Mountain Stage for so long. Ironically, the extremely stormy conditions which initially made the identification so difficult might have been the very reason the Black Scoter was close enough to identify in the first place. ■



The subtly 'chunkier' build of the Black Scoter (centre) can be made out here, as it cruises with its commoner congeners.

STATS & FACTS

First recorded:

Llanfairfechan,
Caernarvonshire,
28 October 2004-
29 March 2005

Last recorded: Blackdog/
Murcar, Aberdeenshire,
14 June-6 July 2012

Previous British records:
11

Previous Irish records: 0

Mega rating: ★★★★★



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Rarities: January 2015

Winter's wanderers mostly settle in



With a Slaty-backed Gull to contend with, but the fourth Little Bustard of the year found shot dead, there was still the odd mega to be had among the long-staying rarities, says **Josh Jones**.

A first-winter Laughing Gull at New Brighton, Cheshire, was an exotic addition to the roosting Common Redshanks, Turnstones and Purple Sandpipers from 3rd.

The year started well with the continued presence of the Little Bustard in East Yorkshire. It performed well in a kale field near Fraisthorpe throughout New Year's Day for hundreds of assembled birders, but had disappeared by 2nd (see last month's *Birdwatch*, pages 8-9). A second bird was discovered near Blofield, Norfolk, on 22nd but unfortunately was found dead by a roadside; with bloody damage to the face, forensics revealed it to have been killed by a shotgun.

Just as 2014 started strongly in Scotland with American Coot, this year also began with bang when a young drake Harlequin Duck was found on the River Don in Aberdeen on 3rd (see last month's *Birdwatch*, page 11). Rather drab, its gender was clinched the following day and the bird went on to perform supremely well throughout the month, its plumage improving progressively as it moulted and grew in new feathers. With a steady stream of admirers throughout, it must rank as the most popular bird of the month and will no doubt attract further visitors should it remain until spring.

Causing the greatest shockwaves, though, was the arrival of a stunning adult Slaty-backed Gull at Ireland's gull-



DAVID MAIN

Last month's Ivory Gull at Ardmair, Highland, remained there until at least 4th, but was intermittently located after 13th as it worked its way north, with milder weather presumably enabling it to reorient and head north-west.

watching Mecca of Killybegs, Co Donegal (see pages 8-9). The bird was found on 17th and showed extremely well throughout the day. Fortunately for Irish listers, it lingered for a second morning before flying off, alone, never to be seen again. This is the second Irish record and closely follows last February's near-adult, which was present in Galway city for a matter of minutes. Photos seem to confirm that this latest individual was a different bird. However, the wait for a co-operative, long-staying bird in either Britain or Ireland goes on.

Yanks' indefinite stay

Lingering megas included American Coots still present at Balranald, North Uist, and Lough Gill, Co Kerry; the latter was backed up by a pair of Lesser Scaup on the same water body. Four more Lesser Scaup remained in Ayrshire, Powys, Glamorgan and Cornwall.

In eastern Cornwall, a young drake King Eider off Maenporth from 27-31st represented the first Cornish record since 2001. Another drake was again in Aberdeenshire late in the month, while the female was reported sporadically from Ruddon's Point, Fife, throughout January, and another was in



The New Brighton Laughing Gull aroused the curiosity of many non-birding locals when it showed well flying around very public parts of the harbour.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFLM.COM)



MARTIN GOODEY

The long-staying Eastern Black Redstart on St Mary's, Scilly, looked like being a winter fixture when it was photographed there on 6th, but disappeared seemingly forever on 12th.

Bluemull Sound, Shetland, on 29th.

Ireland's first Black Scoter was an excellent find on 8th off Rossbeigh, Co Kerry (the site of Ireland's first Stejneger's Scoter in 2011); it went on to linger into February (see page 12). Another Black Scoter was off Cheswick Sands, Northumbs, from 20th, although it was fairly intermittent in its appearances; the same site also hosted a drake in 2011 – could it be the same bird?

Otherwise, the month's wildfowl highlight was a drake American Black Duck on Scilly. First seen

in flight on Samson on 19th, it later relocated to Tresco, where it remained to the month's end. A similar scenario applied to a drake Blue-winged Teal at The Shunan, Orkney, which settled in to stay after its discovery on 17th.

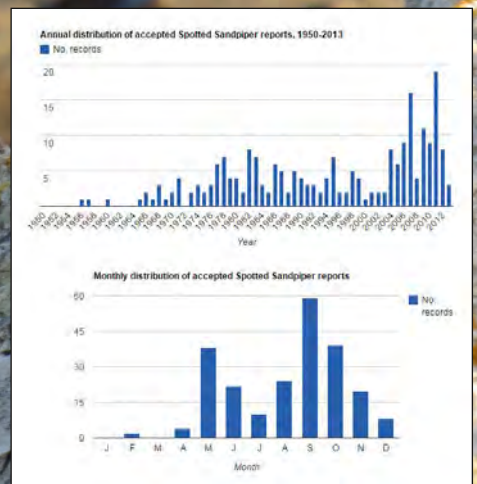
Scottish Richardson's Cackling Geese were seen on Islay, Argyll, and North Uist, Outer Hebrides, while a third individual remained with the Barnacles in the Lissadell area of Co Sligo. Potentially rarer was a Ridgway's Cackling Goose (of the form *minima*) at West



NEIL BOWMAN

Unfortunately present at an inaccessible private site in Norfolk, this smart 'Northern' Long-tailed Tit was the only confirmed recent sighting of this vagrant subspecies, though a couple of 'possibles' were also reported.

Remaining until 19th at Inverallochy, Aberdeenshire, this Spotted Sandpiper was an unusual rarity for January, as can be seen in the lower of the two Birdguides.com graphs (inset). Though a few birds have lingered into the month, none has ever been discovered in January. The general increase in reports over the years can be seen in the top graph.



JOHN NADIN

Freugh Airfield and latterly Cults Loch, Dumfries and Galloway. Unfortunately this bird was not with Barnacle Geese – always the most likely carrier species – but chose to associate with local Canadas and Greylags. Last seen in Lothian back in December, the white-morph Ross's Goose was relocated in Northumberland at East Chevington on 24th and was last noted at nearby Druridge on 29th. Meanwhile, a Red-breasted Goose was on Stronsay, Orkney, on 25th.

Back to Cornwall, and the Mount's Bay Pacific Diver continued to perform unusually well, being seen regularly off either Marazion or Penzance for much of the month.

Hampshire's second Greater Yellowlegs took top billing when

it suddenly appeared at Titchfield Haven on 11th (see last month's *Birdwatch*, page 15). Bizarrely for a mid-winter record, the bird disappeared as quickly as it arrived and was not present the following day. Similarly brief was a Pacific Golden Plover among thousands of its European counterparts at Alkborough Flats, Lincs, on 29th. This represents only the second January record of what is very much an unusual winter vagrant – the first was in Cornwall in 1996, a particularly impressive find. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the bird could not be found subsequently, but it is likely that it will still be in the company of European Golden Plovers somewhere in north Lincolnshire.

The Spotted Sandpiper

continued its lonely vigil at Inverallochy, Aberdeenshire, to 19th only; perhaps the often-atrocious Scottish winter weather became too much for it to take. A Lesser Yellowlegs was a surprise find at North Berwick, Lothian, on 2nd but only stayed a few days; other wintering birds remained in East Sussex and Counties Dublin and Clare.

Smuggled Ivory

Still present in the harbour at Uig, Skye, Argyll, on 4th, the juvenile Ivory Gull (see last month's *Birdwatch*, page 12) was subsequently located at Ardmair, some 50 miles to the east-north-east, on 13th. Photo evidence once again enabled identification of it as the same bird. It went on to show extremely well at times for the following eight days, either there or at nearby Ullapool, before disappearing.

The only Bonaparte's Gull of the month was the regular adult around Dawlish Warren, Devon, while the Laughing Gull also notched up another month at Ballycotton, Co Cork. A good candidate for an American Herring Gull was photographed on Tiree,

Argyll, on 21st but was not seen subsequently, while a first-winter was confirmed from photos at Rubh' Arnal, North Uist, Outer Hebrides, on 29th.

The Blyth's Pipit (see last month's *Birdwatch*, page 10) looked set to winter at Calder Park, West Yorks, and thus its disappearance after 6th was something of a surprise. Similarly, the Eastern Black Redstart which looked like it would remain on St Mary's, Scilly, until spring suddenly disappeared after 12th.

The three Penduline Tits continued to show on and off at Darts Farm near Topsham, Devon, throughout January but, as so often with this species, could be extremely elusive and disappear for long periods at a time. The only other rare passerine was an apparent *caudatus* Long-tailed Tit at a private site in east Norfolk. ■

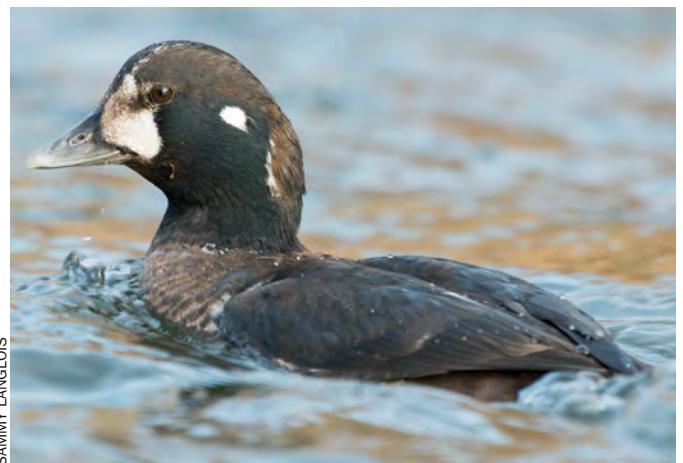
• For full details of all January's sightings, go to www.birdguides.com. To receive free illustrated weekly sightings summaries and other news, sign up at bit.ly/BGWeeklyNews.

BIRDCUIDES



TIM WHITE

Up to three Penduline Tits, including this first-winter male, were at Darts Farm RSPB, Devon, between the fishing pond and the hide all month, remaining well into February.



SAMMY LANGLOIS

The first-winter drake Harlequin Duck on the River Don, at Seaton in suburban Aberdeen, proved both exceedingly popular and reliable, and began to moult in its blue adult feathers as its lengthy stay progressed.

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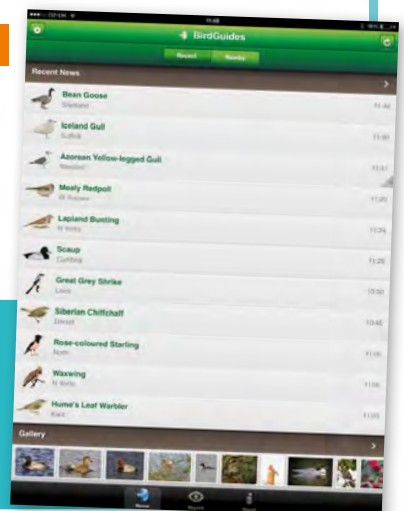
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Scarcities: January 2015

Winter warblers linger

The month held good numbers of the usual wildfowl and gulls, along with unusual counts of overwintering summer visitors, writes **Josh Jones**.

Among the unseasonal wintering warblers was this Yellow-browed Warbler at College Reservoir, Cornwall, from 15th, one of at least eight in the county, with several in other south-western counties.

ALEX GREENE



TONY MILLS (WWW.NOTJUSTBIRDS.COM)

The other multiple overwintering species in Cornwall was Siberian Chiffchaff, with this bird at Marazion Marsh RSPB on 17th. A minimum of 10 were in the county, and perhaps more remain undiscovered.

With new year lists to amass, birders were out in force in January to log a decent range of scarce and unusual species on offer nationwide.

Double figures of Black Brant included three adults still on the Dengie Marshes, Essex, on New Year's Day and two birds together in both Suffolk and East Yorkshire, the latter count including a cryptic first-winter in the Spurn area from 25th. Individuals were otherwise widely distributed between Devon and Lincolnshire, the exception being a single bird lingering in Co Kerry.

Geese were otherwise poorly represented during the month, with the white-morph Snow Goose again seen in flight on the Norfolk coast

on 4th and another on Orkney early in the month; the 'Lesser Canada Goose' (of the form *parvipes*) also remained at Wexford Wildfowl Reserve, Co Wexford.

After several lean years, this winter has seen a welcome return of American Wigeon, with three birds in Cornwall – two females still on Gannel Estuary, and a drake at Kingsmill Lake from 11th. Others were noted in Devon, West and North Yorkshire, Aberdeenshire, Highland and Counties Cork, Wexford, Leitrim and Donegal. Green-winged Teal numbers were about par, with as many as 20 recorded, including two together at Caerlaverock, Dumfries and Galloway, on 13th.

An impressive four Ring-necked



ANDREW MOON

Great Grey Shrike is less than annual in Buckinghamshire, so this bird at Grove, discovered on 30 December but lingering into February, drew many admirers; it was the first in the county since 2011.



The numbers of Shore Lark wintering in Britain have diminished over the years, as the few reports to Birdguides.com reveal (see map right), but small numbers are still to be found in coastal East Anglia; this bird was at Covehithe Broad, Suffolk, on 4th.

KIT DAY



Ducks were seen together at Lough Leane, Co Kerry, on 2nd, with smaller counts thereafter. At least half a dozen others were noted around Ireland while, over in Britain, two females remained at Carlingwark Loch, Dumfries and Galloway, with at least another seven spread around. The female Ferruginous Duck remained at Slimbridge, Glos, all month, as did the drake at Blashford Lakes, Hants.

At least five Surf Scoters were still to be found off Old Colwyn, Conwy, throughout January, while the young drake wintering on the Stour Estuary continued to be seen from both the Suffolk and Essex shores. Two immatures were off Rosslare harbour, Co Wexford,

from mid-month, with further Irish records from Counties Down, Louth and Clare. Lothian and Fife held on to one drake apiece and a further bird was off Unst, Shetland, from 18-24th. Despite the often stormy conditions, the only White-billed Divers were presumably returning birds at traditional locations on Orkney and Shetland.

Kent's heron magnet

January was notable for the unusual number of Night Herons seen, with a juvenile at Nickoll's Quarry, Kent, from 14-23rd just a few miles from the chosen locality of last winter's Chinese Pond Heron. It or another was at Steyning, West Sussex, on 25th, an adult was at Sparham GP and

Lenwade, Norfolk, and another juvenile was seen irregularly at Youghal, Co Cork, from 8th. The two Cattle Egrets remained around Dungeness, Kent, all month, while Great Egrets were both numerous and widespread across England.

Long-staying Glossy Ibises remained in Cambridgeshire and Co Waterford, while last month's bird was still in Devon to 10th; the Frampton Marsh, Lincs, individual also made its first appearance since 7 December when it showed up on 18th.

Rough-legged Buzzards remained both popular and prominent throughout January, with the extremely confiding juvenile at Grindale, East Yorks, still performing well. Two remained

at Burnham Overy Marshes, Norfolk, throughout, with two again on the South Yorkshire moors late on. In Dumfries and Galloway, another well-watched bird remained at Menck Pass, while further popular individuals included juveniles at Jevington, East Sussex, Wallasea Island, Essex, and Holme Fen, Cambridgeshire.

Ring-billed Gulls numbering at least 25 around Ireland included counts of four at Nimmo's Pier, Co Galway, and at least five birds at various sites around Cork city; three were in Bray, Co Wicklow, and several twos were also noticed. A good showing in Britain included two still in Hampshire and first-winters in Cornwall and



DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

This third-winter Iceland Gull near Rainham Marshes, Greater London, on 16th was ringed in Norway in April 2012. It was only the third-ever foreign-ringed Iceland Gull recovery in Britain, and the first for 60 years.



CHRIS COOK

December's female Ferruginous Duck was resident at Slimbridge WWT, Gloucestershire, throughout, and was one of two in the country. Since arriving from the east, it has favoured the Asian Pen rather than the reserve itself.

the Outer Hebrides.

Despite potentially suitable influx conditions, white-winged gull numbers remained fairly low throughout, with a peak count of 11 Glaucous Gulls on Tiree, Argyll, and at least seven on The Mullet, Co Mayo. Iceland Gull numbers were even lower, and just a handful of Kumlien's were seen. The latter included the returning Littlehampton, West Sussex, bird, now in a smart second-winter plumage, and a juvenile touring the West Midlands.

The Devon Hoopoe just made it into 2015 when it was seen on 2nd; another was reported in flight in neighbouring Dorset on 8th.

Wintering migrants

It's been a great winter for Richard's Pipits. A new bird was discovered at Swale NNR, Kent, from 25th, while lingering individuals were at Breydon Water, Norfolk, from 7th (last seen on 14 December), Redcliff Point, Dorset, Horse Eye Level, East Sussex, and Cloughton Wyke, North Yorks, with two near Stolford, Somerset, on 9th, one of which remained thereafter.

Potentially very interesting in a British context was a Yellow Wagtail at Shepherd's Chine, Isle of Wight, from 25-30th. Though not looking too remarkable in images, the bird was said to possess a call considerably harsher than a *flava* wagtail, and the possibility of it being an Eastern Yellow Wagtail seems high.

It may not be a 'Waxwing winter', but there was a steady trickle of reports through January as a



Pomarine Skua is very scarce in the winter months, when most are off the coast of West Africa, so this juvenile at Knott End, off Pilling Lane, Lancashire, on 17th, proved popular.

PETER STANFIELD

small number of birds arrived. In total 93 reports of the species were disseminated on Bird News Extra, with two reaching as far west as Bangor, Co Down, on 17th. Counts were never huge, but a flock of around 60 at Spennymoor in Co Durham and flocks of 21 in Northumberland and Aberdeenshire were the highest tallies. Most records, however, were of ones and twos, with birds spreading through East Anglia and into the Midlands as January progressed.

A species not renowned for its wintering exploits, the Reed Warbler at Marston Sewage Treatment Works, Lincs, remained throughout the month and, quite remarkably, another was trapped and ringed at Chew Valley Lake, Somerset, on 30th. Almost as bizarre was

the occurrence of a Common Whitethroat at Reculver, Kent, on New Year's Day, along with a Pallas's Warbler at Dungeness the same day. Lesser Whitethroats were seen in Plymouth, Devon, on New Year's Day, at North Warren, Suffolk, from 2-4th, in Lochwinnoch, Clyde, from 8th and at Carrigaline, Co Cork, from 19-21st. Those seen well enough were touted as 'Eastern' birds, presumably *blythi*.

Two Yellow-browed Warblers remained in Devon and at least six were seen in Cornwall, including two birds at Gwennap Sewage Works and new birds at Polwheveral Creek and College Res; the only other record came from Bristol on 27th. A Dusky Warbler entertained at Chichester GP West Sussex, from 5-19th, while another was at

Marton Mere, Lancs, on 16th.

A Ring Ouzel at Noar Hill, Hants, from 2nd proved the precursor to a surprising series of January records highlighted by a remarkable four at Nant Ffrancon, Gwynedd, from 16th. Others were seen in Gloucestershire and Devon, with a belated record of three coming from Cumbria in late December.

An excellent mid-winter record concerned the arrival of two Serins in Gunners Park, Essex, on 29th, lingering there into February and giving good views at times.

A wintering Rose-coloured Starling was discovered in Northumberland, at Prudhoe on 11th, and remained there until the end of the month. ■

BIRDBUIDES 



Waxwing reports picked up a little in January, but this was certainly not a good winter for the species and few flocks reached double figures. Most were restricted to the east coast, as the BirdGuides.com map shows (right). This drinking bird was at The Leas, South Shields, Co Durham, on 31st, and attracted another as it stayed into February.

LEE HARRIS



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Western Palearctic: January 2015

Rarities surround the Mediterranean

The countries fringing the Mediterranean produced the best birds of late winter, writes **Josh Jones**, including a second regional record.

This Red-billed Teal in the Aran Valley stayed around just long enough for Israeli listers to add it to their tally; a number of hybrid juvenile Red-billed Teal x Mallard were also found in the area. There is just one previous regional record, also from Israel, back in 1958.



One of the more intriguing records of the month was a Red-billed Teal in the Arava Valley at Idan, Israel, on 30-31st. The bird was in pristine condition, appeared wary and, with one previous Israeli (and regional) record, one suspects this bird will be accepted as wild unless any subsequently damning evidence comes to light. Israel's seventh Great Shearwater was photographed off Jaffa, on the Mediterranean coast, on 6th, while the country's ninth Bateleur was a juvenile seen near Lakhish on the

south Judean plains on 30th.

In Kuwait, the Lesser Flamingo lingered in Sulaibikhat Bay, adjacent to Kuwait City, after first being found in November, while last month's bird at Eilat, Israel, remained throughout.

The Grey-headed Gull was seen around Bisceglie, Puglia, Italy, until 18th at least, when it showed extremely well in the harbour there. Also in the region, the Pied Kingfisher continued to prove elusive near Ugento and a Great Black-headed Gull was at Taranto on 18th. A Great Tit at Simar NR on 26th was just the fourth to be seen on Malta since 1950.

What is potentially Spain's first Brown Shrike was seen

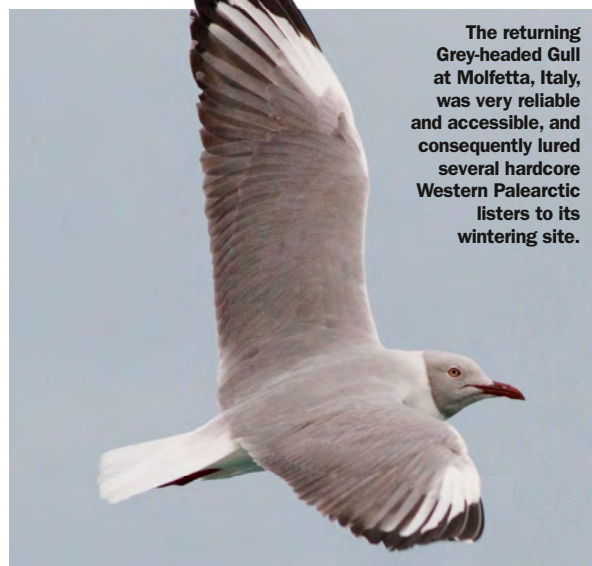
at Deltebre, Catalonia, on 6th, although it proved extremely elusive and was not seen again until February. Spain's first Pygmy Cormorant also remained at Aiguamolls de l'Empordà and, in Galicia, the returning Thayer's Gull continued to show well at Xove.

One of the most striking records concerned the belated news of an African Crake photographed as it showed well in a small green space in the middle of the town of Puerto Rico, Gran Canaria, on Boxing Day. There have now been several regional records of this attractive sub-Saharan species, with Tenerife and Gran Canaria boasting the lion's share.

Azorean records included the Willet still on São Miguel all month, as well as a fine spread of wintering vagrants on Terceira including Great Blue Heron, Short-billed Dowitcher and good numbers of wildfowl.

In Western Sahara, a male Sudan Golden Sparrow recorded at Bir Anzarane on 30th was a precursor to unprecedented numbers seen there in February (more on that next month). Cyprus's second Crimson-winged Finch was discovered at Mandria, Paphos, on 13th; remarkably, it was joined by a second individual on 20th.

Just the fourth Spotted Sandpiper for The Netherlands



The returning Grey-headed Gull at Molfetta, Italy, was very reliable and accessible, and consequently lured several hardcore Western Palearctic listers to its wintering site.



The Thayer's Gull in Galicia, north-west Spain, continued to show well with its Lesser Black-backed (rear) and Yellow-legged (front) companions.

OZ HORINE

JOSH JONES

ALVARO RODRÍGUEZ POMARES

Photographed on 3 February, the Dark-eyed Junco at Groningen, The Netherlands, will be the country's second-ever record if accepted.



The Dutch Oriental Turtle Dove of the form *meena* lingered at Vlaardingen throughout.

MARTIN V D SCHALK (WWW.PBASE.COM_MARTINVDSCHALK)

JAAP DENEE was near Medemblik, Noord-Holland, from 20th, while a Little Bustard was found with Eurasian Wigeon near Nijkerk, Gelderland, on 23rd. The Oriental Turtle Dove remained at Vlaardingen all month, but could be elusive. In neighbouring Belgium, the Wallcreeper continued to show well in Dinant throughout.

A stunning near-adult Glaucous-winged Gull was found in Reykjavík harbour, Iceland, from 30th onwards. Two American White-winged Scoters were seen (at Reykjavík harbour and Keflavík) and the drake Hooded Merganser also remained all month.

Both the Black-throated Accentor and Azure Tit remained at their

respective Finnish locations throughout January, while a first-winter female Red-throated Thrush or hybrid was at Hamina from 21st – subtle in its plumage, it certainly appears to show some rufous both in the tail and upper breast, but whether this amounts to a pure *ruficollis* is unclear.

In Sweden, the American Black Duck was seen again at Båstad, Skåne, and the Middle Spotted Woodpecker was still on Gotland early on. Other records included Poland's sixth Sooty Shearwater photographed on 4th and Lithuania's first Calandra Lark on 30th. ■

BIRDBGUIDES 



Blue-winged Teal and Lesser Scaup swimming in tandem is not a common sight in the region, but these two 'Yanks' were photographed together on Boa Vista, Cape Verde Islands, on 4 December.

MAX DEITTORI

This near-adult Glaucous-winged Gull (with Herring Gull behind) in Reykjavík harbour initially gave Icelandic birders the runaround, appearing on 30th but remaining into February.



DANIEL BERGMANN

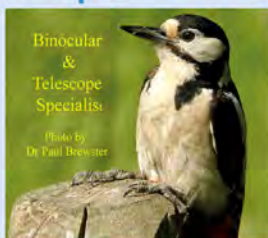


ARNOUD B VAN DEN BERG (WWW.THESOUNDAPPROACH.CO.UK)

The fourth Spotted Sandpiper for The Netherlands pitched up on Medemblik, Noord-holland, from 20th, and could be very confiding as it fed on a beach adjacent to the IJsselmeer.

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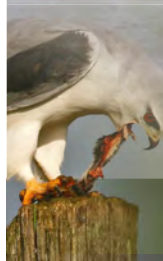
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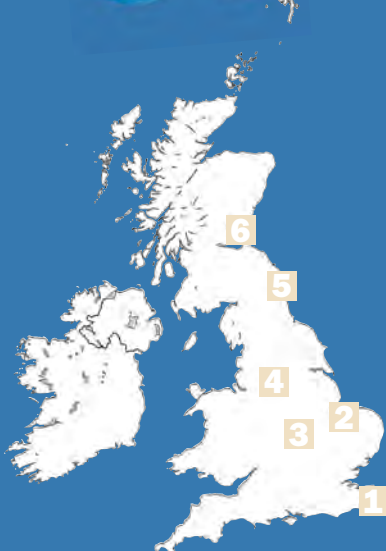


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Where
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- 1** St Margaret's at Cliffe, Kent.
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- 2** Dersingham Bog, Norfolk.
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- 3** Nene Valley GP, Northamptonshire.
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- 4** Upper Derwent Valley, Derbyshire.
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- 6** Loch Leven, Perth and Kinross.
Page 32

MORE MARCH SITES

- Bridgwater Bay, Somerset: bit.ly/bw249BridgwaterBay
- Coastal Wexford: bit.ly/bw225CoastalWexford
- The Colne Valley, Greater London: bit.ly/bw237ColneValley
- The East Sussex coast: bit.ly/bw225EastSussex
- Hastings CP, Pett Level and Scotney, East Sussex/Kent: bit.ly/bw213HastingsCP
- Humber Estuary, East Yorkshire: bit.ly/bw237HumberEstuary
- Northward Hill RSPB, Kent: bit.ly/bw249NorthwardHill
- Poole Harbour, Dorset: bit.ly/bw237PooleHarbour
- Potteric Carr WWT, South Yorkshire: bit.ly/bw249PottericCarr



1 SITE OF THE MONTH

ST MARGARET'S

Bockhill Farm at St Margaret's at Cliffe is one of Kent's premier sites for spring migration, with both variety of species and high numbers on offer, says **Brendan Ryan**.

Now absent from many of its former haunts, Tree Sparrow can be seen on passage at Bockhill Farm.



DAVID FEATHERBE (WWW.DAVIDFEATHERBE.CO.UK)

Overlooking the straits of Dover and the French coast, St Margaret's at Cliffe is the closest point in England to continental Europe. This unique position has made it a great place to observe birds arriving from and departing to the Continent.

Most of the birding focus these days is in the area north of the village, known as Bockhill Farm. The area was virtually unknown ornithologically until a group of birders started to watch it intensively in 1994, and it is now recognised as one of Kent's premier birding sites. The key birding interest is migration, and outside the main passage periods between mid-March to early June and

late July to mid-November, the area has little to offer the visiting birder.

St Margaret's at Cliffe is accessed from the A258 between Dover and Deal. From the village, Bockhill Farm can be found from Granville Road, where there is a free car park by the Dover Patrol Monument (TR 374453).

Cliff-top birding

Bockhill Farm sits on top of the famous White Cliffs and is dominated by intensive arable farming, interspersed with small scrubby areas and a limited amount of chalk grassland. The farm itself is surrounded by a small wood, which can be productive. The site has

USEFUL CONTACTS

Travel information and timetables

- **Traveline:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline.info.
- **Traveline Scotland:** 0871 200 2233 or www.travelinescotland.com.
- **Traveline Cymru:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline-cymru.info

- **Stagecoach Bus:** www.stagecoachbus.com.
- **Arriva Bus:** 0844 800 4411 or www.arrivabus.co.uk.
- **National Rail:** 0845 748 4950 or www.nationalrail.com.

National bird news
BirdGuides.com: for all bird news

and to report your own sightings, call 0333 577 2473, email sightings@birdguides.com or visit www.birdguides.com.

Mapping

Access fully interactive and annotated Google maps for all these itineraries at bit.ly/BWMaps.

Further information

- **County bird recorders:** www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording/county-bird-recorders.
- **Birdwatch Bookshop:** for discounted birding books see www.birdwatch.co.uk/store.

Spring migration can be notable for huge numbers of common species; numbers of incoming Goldfinches at St Margaret's can exceed 10,000.

THOMAS HARBIG (WWW.BIRDMAGENCY.COM)



an impressive track record of turning up rarities, especially in the autumn. While spring offers fewer star birds, it is nevertheless a great place to observe bird migration in action.

Not surprisingly given the site's location, visible migration features prominently in any birding itinerary at Bockhill. The first few hours after dawn are usually spent 'vis-migging' from the cliff-top near the Bluebird Tea Rooms (TR 374453) ①. The exact spot is determined by the wind direction and any need for shelter. Movements are always into the prevailing wind, and in spring this needs to be in the northerly sector to be most productive. A wind from the north-west is best, as it encourages migrating birds from the near-Continent to move north across the channel.

Numbers game

In March and April, movements of migrating birds can be spectacular, with many thousands of individuals of a variety of species on the move. The height of the cliffs means that many of the birds pass at eye level, but nevertheless a good ear is often the key to identification.

Every day is different in terms of which species feature, although finches dominate and Chaffinch is usually the most numerous species. Counts of **Goldfinches** can often exceed 10,000 in a couple of hours, while mixed in with these are often the odd

Brambling, as well as small groups of **Lesser Redpoll**, **Siskin** and **Greenfinch**. **Serins** are regularly seen in spring and occasionally have stayed around for a few days.

Although declining, **Tree Sparrow** – a difficult bird to see in east Kent these days – is frequently seen in these movements and is invariably picked up

on call. On some days large numbers of **Meadow Pipits** pass through, with the odd **Tree Pipit** from April onwards. **Pied Wagtails** can often exceed 100, and undoubtedly include a number of **White Wagtails** from across the Channel.

Late March usually sees the first hirundines pass by, but it is not until later

Check the cliff-top bushes for returning migrants such as Black Redstart.



DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



in the spring that good numbers can be seen. Over the years several **Red-rumped Swallows** have been mixed in with the **Swallows**, although they rarely linger and are often only glimpsed as they dash by on their way north.

Raptors on the move

Passerine movements tend to die down a few hours after dawn. However, in the right conditions in spring, usually a light north-westerly wind, it can be worth remaining on the cliff-top to look for migrating raptors, which tend to arrive around mid-morning when the air temperature has risen. Seeing migrating raptors coming in over the sea is always a thrilling sight.

Late March and early April can see impressive numbers of **Common Buzzards** and groups of **Red Kites**. **Marsh Harrier** is frequently seen, though **Hen** and **Montagu's Harriers**, **Osprey** and **Rough-legged Buzzard** are all possible but much scarcer. Movements of **Sparrowhawks** often reach double figures. Later in spring, **Honey Buzzards** can occasionally be seen coming 'in off', while there have been several spring **Black Kites**.

If there is no discernable movement, it is worth checking the cliff-top bushes and scrubby areas around Bockhill Farm ②. Although more productive in autumn, **Firecrest**, **Black Redstart** and maybe an early **Common Chiffchaff** or **Northern Wheatear** can usually be found in late March; rarities at this time have included Little Bunting and Short-toed Treecreeper. If nothing else you will be able to familiarise yourself with the area for when you return for Bockhill's main event in the autumn! ■

STEVE KNELL



Once passerine passage has died down, it could be worth waiting for raptor movements, with groups of Red Kites possible.



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Kent, Surrey and Sussex by Don Taylor, Jeffery Wheatley and Paul James (Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

› Sites and access

There is free and open access to most of this National Trust-managed site and the footpaths crossing the adjacent farmland. The nearest train stations are at Martin Mill and Dover. Stagecoach Bus operates regular bus services to St Margaret's at Cliffe. The Sustrans Kent Coastal Castles Ride runs between Deal and St Margaret's, past Bockhill Farm. This itinerary requires walking on paths that are unimproved.

› Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 138 and Landranger 179.

› Web resources

- www.kentos.org.uk for the Kent Ornithological Society, with site information and recent sightings.
- Follow on twitter: [@bockhillbirders](https://twitter.com/bockhillbirders).



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to the fully annotated Google maps.

ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPPING © CROWN COPYRIGHT. AM45/10

2

DERSINGHAM BOG NNR

By Connor Rand

Where and why

Dersingham Bog NNR is situated in north-west Norfolk, on the edge of the expansive Sandringham estate, with views over The Wash. It is a regionally important heathland bog, representing the largest acid valley mire in East Anglia. Most of the ground is waterlogged throughout the year, being interspersed with saplings and deeper pools, while the site is bordered by mixed woodland.

Route planner

The reserve is easy to access from the A149. Two miles south of Dersingham, turn west onto one of the two minor roads to Wolferton which cross to form a 'triangle'. Take the northernmost (right-hand) road from the tip of the triangle. Continue down this road to a car park on the right (TF 663286). From the car park walk down the main path and turn left at the first crossroads.

From here you will reach the high vantage point of Wolferton Cliff **1**, overlooking a pine wood and The Wash beyond. This is an excellent point for visible migration. Many of the earliest-moving species such as **Linnet**, **Skylark** and **Meadow Pipit** may be passing in some numbers early in the morning. Hirundines can be obvious – **Sand Martins** sometimes breed on the cliff and **Swallows** and **House Martins** can be noted moving through.

Outgoing migratory species are also likely to be seen, especially the last of the masses of **Pink-footed Geese**. Careful listening or scanning of the pine tops may produce a flock of **Common**

Linnet may be seen in numbers, often stopping on passage. Listen out for the male's melodious twittering song.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSOFTHEWORLD.COM)

Crossbills as this species tends to be more obvious at this time of year. Scan towards The Wash for raptors: **Peregrine Falcon**, **Merlin** and **Hen Harrier** are all possible and **Red Kites** have become more frequent passage migrants in recent years. There is always the chance of something rarer, such as a **Rough-legged Buzzard**.

Taking the sandy path along

the edge of the cliff, you will come to a set of steps leading down to the bog **2**. Pause here, as this is the best opportunity to look across the site. As well as the **Barn Owls** and **Marsh Harriers** that frequently quarter this area, this is another good place to scan for more unusual raptors.

The area can be good for

visible

migration. **Lesser**

Redpoll is likely to be frequent, as well as a mixture of outgoing migrants such as **Brambling** and the first incoming migrants such as hirundines, soon to be accompanied by the first **Yellow Wagtails** calling overhead.

It is worth taking the time to explore the bog area. Head down the steps and around the boardwalk, before continuing on as far as time allows. Check the tops of the heather for **European Stonechat**. **Shelduck** is also likely to be obvious early in the morning at this time of year and you may see small parties of **Common Crossbill**, **Siskin** and other finches flying between pine strips. In some years **Northern Wheatears** and **Ring Ouzels** are noted.

The first returning **Tree Piptits** will sing and parachute from the tops of the lone pines, especially in the mornings and the evenings. In the more deciduous areas of mixed woodland around the edge of the bog **Common Chiffchaffs** will be singing, with **Blackcaps** chortling from denser vegetation.

Retrace your route back to the steps. Head past the bench rather than along the sandy path and you will reach the first crossroads by the car park. As dusk approaches this clearing is a good spot to look and listen for the first 'roding' **Woodcocks** of the season, as well as hooting **Tawny Owls**, drawing to a close an excellent day at an often overlooked site that can always bring an early spring surprise. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Best Birdwatching Sites in Norfolk by Neil Glenn (third edition, Buckingham Press, £17.95) – order from £15.95 on page 77.

> Sites and access

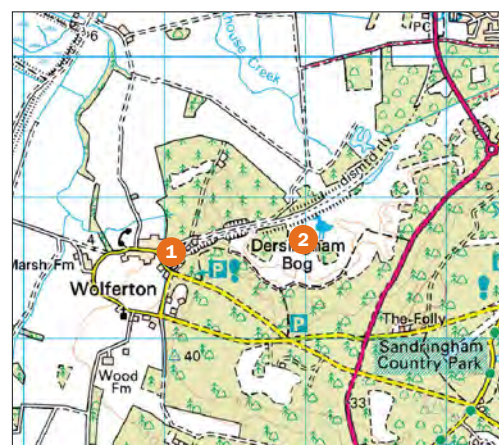
The site is open access and both car parks are free. The nearest train station is at King's Lynn. Norfolk Green buses from King's Lynn and Hunstanton stop at Wolferton Triangle, providing access to the site; call 01553 776980 or visit www.norfolkgreen.co.uk for details. Sandringham is on Route 1 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network. The paths are well marked and provide easy access for visitors. Steps and some more varied terrain means the site has limited disabled access. There are no toilets or other such facilities on site.

> Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 250 and Landranger 132.

> Web resources

- www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england for more information on Natural England, which manages the site.
- www.noa.org.uk for the Norfolk Ornithological Association.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps



3

NENE VALLEY GP

By Mike Alibone

Where and why

Located in Northamptonshire's River Nene Valley, three adjacent localities lie at the heart of a chain of mature lakes, which include willow scrub and marshland, initially created by sand and gravel extraction during the latter part of the last century. Summer Leys LNR, Ditchford GP and Stanwick Lakes all include habitats which are managed for wildlife, with the last site also providing a modern visitor centre.

Route planner

Summer Leys LNR **1** is located between Wollaston and Great Doddington. Park in the main car park on Hardwater Road and look over the main lake and scrape from the hides, which offer close views of wintering wildfowl, including **Eurasian Wigeon**, **Northern Shoveler** and occasionally **Northern Pintail**. **Great Egrets** have been regular visitors in recent years and there is an outside chance of a **Bittern** in the reedbeds around the scrape.

Follow the path anti-clockwise from the car park to the screen hide to view a series of islands which hold roosting gulls and **Cormorants**. If the water level is low enough, look out for **Ringed Plover** and the first migrant **Little Ringed Plover**, with the possibility of **Garganey** among the dabbling ducks.

Continue along the path to the feeding station hide, where **Tree Sparrows** are regular visitors. Cross the lane opposite the feeding station to view Mary's Lake, which holds good numbers

of **Common Goldeneye** and occasionally a lingering **Smew**, before continuing along the track to complete a circuit of the reserve and return to the car park.

A short drive via the A509 and A45 to the car park at Ditchford Lane provides the opportunity to explore the scrubby Ditchford Lakes and Meadows **2** to the east, where **Cetti's Warbler** is resident. Further north along the lane, there is limited roadside parking with access west along a long-disused railway track to the more open pits. Follow the river, walking toward the railway viaduct, and return along the same route. The marshy area between the river and the open water is a regular early spring site for **Water Pipit** and **Jack Snipe**, while **Egyptian Geese** occur anywhere in the area. **Peregrine Falcon** is often encountered on the pylons and **Red Kite** is frequently seen overhead.

Leave Ditchford Lane by car to the north and take the minor road east to Irthlingborough. Park either in Ebbw Vale Road and take the footpath south-east into Irthlingborough Lakes and Meadows **3**, or further east in St Peter's Way and take the surfaced cycle path which runs to School Lane in nearby Higham Ferrers. The adjacent lakes have recently been reprofiled for breeding waders and attract **European Golden Plover**, **Northern Lapwing** and **Common Redshank** as well as **Black-tailed Godwit**.

The cycle path crosses a disused railway track along which it is possible to walk east, under



Little Ringed Plover numbers are increasing in Britain due to man-made habitats like gravel pits. The species can be seen from March.

MARKUS VARESVUO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

the A6, to Station Road, where there is also limited parking. The track continues east into Stanwick Lakes **4**. Check the hedges alongside for **Firecrest**, which has been seen here on several occasions in the past.

Follow the track past Stanwick Lakes visitor centre, bearing left to the hide which overlooks the main lake. This water body frequently holds good numbers of **Goosander**, occasionally **Smew**, **Common Redshank** and **Common Snipe** and has

held a **Green-winged Teal** in several recent early springs. Late afternoons here produce a build-up of pre-roosting gulls, which regularly include **Caspian** and **Yellow-legged**; there have also been numerous records of **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls** over the years. For those not wishing to walk from Ditchford there is a choice of the visitor centre car park, accessed from the Stanwick roundabout on the A45, or lay-by parking with roadside access to the lakes and circular walk. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



- **Where to Watch Birds in the East Midlands** by Graham P Catley (second edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.
- **Northants Birds** edited by Graham Martin; available by post for £8.80 from R W Bullock, 81 Cavendish Drive, Northampton NN3 3HL.

Sites and access

Access to all sites is unrestricted and free. Car parking charges apply at Stanwick Lakes. The visitor centre is open 10 am–5 pm, while the site is open 7 am–9 pm. The nearest train station is Wellingborough. Stagecoach Midlands runs local bus services. Summer Leys and Stanwick have mainly surfaced footpaths and wheelchair access to most hides. The Ditchford complex has mainly rough grass or unsurfaced paths

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 224 and Landrangers 152 and 153.

Web resources

- www.wildlifebcn.org/reserves-by-county for information on the Wildlife Trust reserves.
- www.stanwicklakes.org.uk for Stanwick Lakes.
- www.northantsbirds.com/latest-reports for local bird news and latest sightings.
- Follow on Twitter: @StanwickLakes, @wildlifebcn and @bonxie.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

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4

UPPER DERWENT VALLEY

By John Hague

Where and why

The Upper Derwent Valley was dammed in the last century to provide drinking water for Sheffield and the East Midlands. The dams are now managed by Severn Trent Water and were used in 1943 by 617 Squadron of the RAF during practice for the famous 'Dambusters' raid in WWII. The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight still occasionally displays over the reservoirs. The water bodies themselves are not particularly good for birds, but the surrounding area can produce a quality list, if not a very large one. The surrounding areas of moor are managed by the National Trust and generally provide open access via a network of footpaths.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



The stunning Dipper is a possibility as you walk up onto the moor.

Route planner

The Derwent Valley is accessed from the main A57 Snake Pass road between Sheffield and Manchester. Park in the pay and display car park and start your day at the Fairholmes visitor centre (SK 172893) **1**. Birds around the car parks include a variety of finches and tits. You should be able to pick up **Siskin** and **Coal Tit**, which come to the feeders and can at times be easily photographed.

The pines here regularly attract **Common Crossbill** and in good years there can be large flocks roaming the area. Despite their size, the crossbills can be surprisingly elusive and are best picked up by their *chup-chup-chup* flight call as they move about. The rarer Parrot and Two-barred Crossbills have both been found

here in invasion years. Other birds seen around the car parks include the shy and retiring **Jay** and the equally shy **Mistle Thrush**.

Once the café is open it might be advisable to grab a hot drink and a snack in readiness for a session of raptor watching. Better still, make sure you're wrapped up warm and take a thermos flask, as it can be very cold further up the valley.

It is now time to head to Windy Corner **2** for the target birds. Drive carefully along the narrow road as it winds along the shore of the reservoirs. Park safely at SK 167931, taking care not to block the road. Windy Corner is the place to look for **Goshawk** and other raptors. The former has declined alarmingly in the

South Pennines, mainly due to illegal persecution by shooting estates, and is not as reliable as it used to be. Try to choose a bright morning with light winds, as this will give the best chance of seeing the birds as they display.

Other raptors here can include **Common Buzzard** and **Sparrowhawk**, while **Peregrine Falcon** and **Merlin** are often seen as they hunt the moorland opposite. You should also hear **Red Grouse** calling and patient scanning of any rocks or fence posts might reveal a bird or two, or you may see them in flight as they go low and fast over the moor. Raven is also increasingly likely over the ridges on the moors.

If time allows you can walk north on slippery stones and up onto the moor. This route may

produce a **Dipper**, but more likely would be **Grey Wagtail** by the stream. Further up on the moor a few **Ring Ouzels** may be seen, but they are in decline and easily disturbed.

Return to the A57 and head towards Sheffield, taking the minor road on your left towards Strines. Watch carefully along this road for **Short-eared Owl** and Red Grouse.

Park sensibly close to Upper Midhope **3** at SK 215994 and scan the moor from here. Short-eared Owls are regular towards late afternoon, and this winter a **Great Grey Shrike** has been seen regularly. There have also been a couple of Rough-legged Buzzards in the area. Other raptors are a possibility here, including a passing **Hen Harrier** – a good way to end the day. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



- **Where to Watch Birds in the East Midlands** by Rob Fray (second edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.
- **The Birds of Derbyshire** edited by Roy Frost and Steve Shaw (Derbyshire Ornithological Society, £45).

Sites and access

There is free public access to all sites, but car parking fees apply. Trains run along the Hope Valley line to Bamford, from where bus services run to the A57 by The Ladybower Inn. From Sheffield, the 273 and 274 services run along the A57, with some weekday and all Sunday services serving Fairholmes (see www.travelsouthyorkshire.com/sbp). The Upper Derwent Valley Cycle Path is part of the Sustrans National Cycle Route 54. There is disabled access and toilets at Fairholmes visitor centre, but please be aware that many of the paths are unimproved.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer OL1 and Landranger 110.

Web resources

- www.derbyshireos.org.uk for the Derbyshire Ornithological Society.
- www.sbsg.org for the Sheffield Bird Study Group.
- www.peakdistrict.gov.uk for information on the Peak District National Park.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

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DRURIDGE BAY

By Martin Kitching

Where and why

From Newbiggin-by-the-Sea in the south of the area, through the Druridge Bay reserves and north to Amble, this itinerary has several excellent sites for a good day's birding in early spring, in a landscape shaped by its industrial past on the south-east Northumberland coast, with a mosaic of sand dunes, freshwater and brackish pools, migrant-holding shrubs and trees.

Route planner

Newbiggin-by-the-Sea is at the end of the B1334, accessed from the A189, some 15 miles north of Newcastle upon Tyne. Starting here, park in the shadow of St Bartholomew's Church and the Newbiggin Maritime Heritage Centre (NZ 316882) **1**.

Walk from the car park east along the track south of the caravan park, checking St Bartholomew's churchyard for **Black Redstart** and the area around Church Point for **Scandinavian Rock Pipit**. If there are any local birders seawatching from the end of Church Point it will be worth joining them for a

little while at least, with **Great Northern Diver** and **Sandwich Tern** a possibility.

Return to the car, go back along the main road, and turn right (signposted Leisure Centre and Woodhorn). Turn right towards Lynemouth and follow the road along the coast. Park carefully and check the roadside subsidence pool (NZ 299913) **2**. **White Wagtail** would be the prize here, although this flash has produced **Iceland Gull** and **Water Pipit**, and for such a small unassuming pool, it is dripping with potential.

Cresswell Pond NWT (NZ 285941) **3** is 4 miles north of Newbiggin on the minor road along the coast north of Lynemouth. It is always worth checking, particularly during a rising tide, with **Little Ringed Plover** a possible early migrant. **Peregrine Falcon** and **Merlin** are possible anywhere along the coast, and **Short-eared Owl** would be a star bird with very few records in Northumberland for two winters.

Between Cresswell Pond and Druridge Pools, the rough grazing to the east of the road is prime

habitat for **Twite** during the winter, and a great spot to check, from the roadside verge, for **Snow** and **Lapland Buntings**.

Head 1.5 miles north of Cresswell, along an access road where the road bends sharply left. Druridge Pools NWT (NZ 275965) **4** is a mixture of old opencast mineworkings (now flooded) and subsidence pools. Check the clumps of willow and hawthorn near the entrance and the edge of the line of trees and bushes to the west of the access road for **Common Chiffchaff**, **Ring Ouzel**, **Firecrest**, **Great Grey Shrike** and other migrants. Please don't venture into the bushes, but check them from the sides of the access road and the footpaths.

Just north of the turning circle at the end of the access road to Druridge Pools, check the fields for **Northern Wheatear**, and scan the legendary Druridge bushes – these may appear bird-free, but take your time! The main pool at Druridge should be checked for **Smew**, and the flooded Budge field is a regular spot for **Green-winged Teal**, as well as the

possibility of an early **Garganey**.

Heading west to join the A1068 at Widdrington, or on foot through the dunes if you're feeling particularly adventurous, check the isolated bushes in the dunes at East Chevington NWT **5** (NZ 270990; 1.5 miles north of Druridge Pools, along an access road off the A1068) and Hauxley NWT **6** (NU 285023; 2 miles north of East Chevington off the A1068 just north of Radcliffe). Both of these have areas of open water and could produce **Red-necked Grebe**, **Smew** and **Sand Martin**.

In such a sparsely populated county, the potential for finding your own birds is very high, and all of the dunes throughout Druridge Bay have hollows sheltered from the wind, often with isolated bushes, allowing tired birds to rest and feed. If you started at Newbiggin, then you can finish your day with local fish and chips at a local pub; the Widdrington Inn (Widdrington), Wellwood (Amble), Coach Inn (Lesbury) and The Swan (Choppington) are all very good! ■

Check out Druridge Pools for the possibility of an early Garganey.

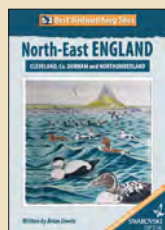


STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Best Birdwatching Sites in North-East England by Brian Unwin (Buckingham Press, £17.95) – order from £15.95 on page 77.

› Sites and access

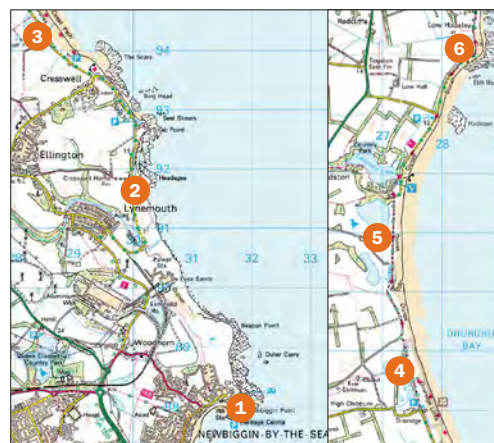
There is free access to all sites. There are train stations at Alnmouth, Acklington and Widdrington. Arriva Bus runs local services. Druridge Bay is on National Cycle Network Route 1. Most of the hides have good disabled access, but some locations have paths and tracks that aren't wheelchair accessible.

› Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 325 and Landranger 81.

› Web resources

- www.ntbc.org.uk for the Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club.
- www.nwt.org.uk for more information on the Northumberland Wildlife Trust reserves.
- Follow on Twitter: @NorthWildlife.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

6

LOCH LEVEN

By Vicky Turnbull

Where and why

Loch Leven RSPB, previously Vane Farm, is 4 miles south-east of Kinross. The reserve is part of Loch Leven NNR, at the heart of which is Scotland's largest lowland loch, an internationally important site for wildlife which supports around 35,000 wildfowl in winter. The RSPB reserve features areas of seasonally wet grassland and open pools on the loch shore, creating key habitat for breeding and wintering birds. To the south of the road is a birch woodland which stretches steeply up the hill to meet an open expanse of heathland.

Route planner

The route begins at the RSPB car park (NT 159989) **1**. Head along the main path towards the visitor centre, where large flocks of tits and finches can be seen; listen for **Great Spotted Woodpecker** calling from nearby trees. During opening hours, drop into the centre to get a ticket before heading out onto the reserve. Check the blackboard for recent sightings.

From the viewing area in the café overlooking the loch, scan through flocks of **Eurasian Teal**, Tufted Duck and **Common Goldeneye** for the more elusive **Smew**. In cold periods look out for **White-tailed Eagles** hunting over the loch. Spend some time watching the feeders in front of the centre, as among the Goldfinches and Great Tits you may find **Brambling** and **Lesser Redpoll**, along with an increasing number of **Tree Sparrows**.

Leaving the visitor centre, head

towards the loch, turning left at the steps and under the road towards the wetland trail. Cross over the Loch Leven Heritage Trail and follow the path to the Gillman Hide (NT 159991) **2**.

Whooper Swans and Mallard often feed in the pools, while large flocks of **Goosander** drift by on the loch. Watch for Tree Sparrows and Greenfinches on the feeders and stay alert for fleeting glimpses of **Kingfisher** or Otter.

Continue along the path, passing the wildflower meadow on your left where **Eurasian Curlew** and flocks of Linnet regularly feed. Watch for **European Stonechat** hopping from post to post.

Stop off in the Waterston Hide (NT 157991) **3** for views of feeding **Greylag** and **Pink-footed Geese** refuelling before heading north to their breeding grounds; check among them for **White-fronted Geese**. Towards the end of the month, keep your eyes and ears peeled for the distinctive call and display flight of **Northern Lapwings** as they prepare to nest on the wet grassland around the hide. **Common Redshank** may be spotted moving along the ditch, feeding in the shallow water or skulking in the longer vegetation.

Carry on to the Carden Hide (NT 155990) **4** which overlooks the 'flood', one of the largest and busiest pools on the reserve. Look for the striking **Northern Pintail** among the Eurasian Teal, Mallard and **Eurasian Wigeon**, with Goosander, Tufted Duck, geese and swans all regularly seen close to the hide. Scan the muddy

White-tailed Eagle can be seen hunting over Loch Leven, especially in cold weather.



REINT JAKOB SCHUT (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

edges and islands for waders such as **Greenshank**, which is regularly spotted on passage.

Watch for Northern Lapwing feeding on the open muddy edges; **Little Ringed Plovers**, which started breeding on the reserve in 2013, favour the gravel areas while prospecting for nest sites. Listen out for the loud *crunk* of **Ravens** as they pass over the wetland, and stay alert for **Peregrine Falcons** swooping down to catch prey on the flood.

Follow the circular path around the meadow until you return to the visitor centre. From here, take a left at the building and head through the picnic area for a bracing walk up the 1-mile Woodland Trail.

Make your way up Vane

Hill **5**, taking a breather on the steep sections to listen out for finches, tits and perhaps a **Jay**. Watch for movements among the trees to be rewarded with views of **Treecreeper** and **Tawny Owl**. Emerge from the wood and out onto the heath up to the viewpoint (NT 163988) to look out for **Red Grouse** disappearing off into the heather.

Stop to take in the view, then head back down the hill and watch for migrating **Ospreys** fishing over the loch before you drop below the tree line again. After returning to the picnic area, pause at the viewing screen to catch a glimpse of **Siskin** and a Red Squirrel on the peanut feeder. Continue back past the visitor centre before returning to the car park. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Britain by Simon Harrap and Nigel Redman (second edition, Christopher Helm, £19.99) – order for £18.99 on page 77.

Sites and access

The RSPB visitor centre is open 10 am–5 pm daily. Car parking is free. Entrance fees apply to the woodland and wetland trails, but are free to RSPB members. The car park is on the B9097 and is signposted from junction 5 on the M90. The nearest train station is at Cowdenbeath. Stagecoach Bus runs local bus services between Cowdenbeath and Kinross. The visitor centre has wheelchair access but the reserve trails are not fully accessible. The Loch Leven Heritage Trail runs for 12 miles around the loch; it is free and accessible for walkers of all levels, cyclists and wheelchair users.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 369 and Landranger 58.

Web resources

- www.rspb.org.uk/lochleven for the RSPB reserve.
- www.nnr-scotland.org.uk/loch-leven for more information on Loch Leven NNR.
- Follow on Twitter: @RSPBLochLeven.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPPING © CROWN COPYRIGHT. AM45/10



MARCH'S TARGET BIRD

Surf Scoter



Surf Scoter is seen with increasing regularity around the coasts of Britain, with multiple individuals recorded every year. Check out Common Scoter flocks for a chance of finding your own.

GEOFF CAMPBELL

This Nearctic seaduck has become increasingly regular in Britain, ceasing to be an official rarity in 1990. Even with more being recorded, however, it is not always easy to find one or even locate a known individual, especially if it is not an adult male.

The species is slightly larger than Common Scoter, and the distinctive black-and-white beacon-like head pattern of the adult male has led to it being known colloquially in North America as a 'skunk-headed coot'. There are about six males reported for every female in Britain, which suggests that females (and probably first-winter males) may be overlooked.

Never that numerous, there are now about 15-20 records annually, usually involving single birds but occasionally a few may gather at a single site. Ten were seen together in Gosford Bay, Lothian, on 13 April 1989 and high counts have also been recorded in Spey Bay, Moray and Nairn (eight in January 1979), and Colwyn Bay, Conwy (seven in December 2014).

In England, most sightings are on the North Sea coast, north of Norfolk, and in the South-West. In Scotland the species is mostly

seen on the east coast, with occasional records from the Outer Hebrides. Individuals often appear to be faithful to a particular site or area. Birds in the Firth of Forth may move between sites and so be seen in both Fife and Lothian.

One returning bird in Devon tended to arrive in late October or early November and leave again in late March or early April. On the east coast firths of Scotland, regularly wintering birds usually appear in October and remain until April or May. This is in contrast to north-east Scotland, where birds are usually found in June and July, with moulting scoter flocks. Pairs have been seen together in spring, and it is possible that breeding might be taking place somewhere in western Europe, perhaps where Velvet and Common Scoters breed.

How to see

Scoters often gather in mixed groups, so check out any large raft of Common Scoters very carefully. It is best to try to find a vantage point which allows you to look slightly down on a flock, especially if the sea is choppy, as birds not only dive but vanish behind

waves. Always scan through a raft several times as birds will be diving and surfacing continuously,

and an individual might be under water when you first scan through the flock. ■



FIND YOUR OWN

Wintering Common Scoters are widely distributed around British and Irish coasts, and it is among these flocks – especially in the west and Scotland – that 'tag along' Surf Scoters are perhaps most likely. Some individuals appear every year at a favoured site and these may offer the best opportunities for seeing the species; check BirdGuides (www.birdguides.com) for details. Although scoters may seem to be solely seaducks in Britain, there are many records of them inland in spring on reservoirs and these have occasionally included a Surf Scoter among the Commons. The sites below have recorded Surf Scoters regularly.

England

- **Cornwall:** Mounts Bay, Penzance (SW 512310)
- **Devon:** Dawlish Warren NNR (SX 983789)

Scotland

- **Moray and Nairn:** Burghead and Findhorn Bays (NJ 037648) and Spey Bay (NJ 348654)
- **Aberdeenshire:** Blackdog (NJ 958141)
- **Fife:** Largo Bay/Ruddons Point (NO 383005)
- **Lothian:** Musselburgh (NT 357738)

Wales

- **Conwy:** Pensarn/Llanddulas/Old Colwyn (SH 906787)

Ireland

- **Kerry:** Ballinskelligs (V 4366)
- **Wexford:** Rosslare (T 1014)



VISIT WWW.BIRDWATCH.CO.UK FOR TIPS ON FINDING MANY MORE TARGET BIRDS



MARK AVERY

Taking responsibility

Scotland has had vicarious liability for landowners since 2012, and it's already making its mark. So why hasn't it been introduced in England? **Mark Avery** wants to know.

Scotland's Wildlife and Natural Environment Act 2011 introduced a law of vicarious liability for wildlife crime with effect from 1 January 2012. The impact of that law was to make it possible for a landowner to share responsibility for wildlife offences committed by their staff. This mirrors the precedent established in other areas of law, such as health and safety, where it isn't just the employee who does wrong and carries the can, but the management system too.

This law should act as a strong incentive to many Scottish shooting estates to clean up their acts, if only because the rich, perhaps titled, landowner will not be very keen on facing the music in a court case. It won't be the money involved that will be the greatest deterrent: it will be the bad publicity. I've had several conversations with friends in Scotland who are hopeful that vicarious liability has already put the wind up some estates and encouraged them to change their ways, particularly over poisoning offences. We will see whether wildlife crime cases drop in Scotland over the next few years or not.

In June 2013, Peter Finley Bell pleaded guilty to poisoning a Common Buzzard and possessing strychnine, alphachloralose and carbofuran; he was fined £4,450. Bell was a gamekeeper working for the Glasserton and Physgill Estates in Dumfries and Galloway.

On 23 December 2014, landowner Ninian Robert Hathorn Johnston Stewart pleaded guilty to being vicariously liable for Bell's criminal actions and was fined a rather paltry £675 (bit.ly/bw272VicariousLiability). The fine is low, but the shockwaves of this first prosecution under the new law rattled the plates on many a Scottish landowner's Christmas dinner table. How many were wondering whether they might ever be in the same position?

There was a major aftershock, too, when it emerged that Johnston Stewart had also lost 'a high five-figure' sum from his agricultural payments as a result of this misdemeanour.

In November 2011, conservationist Chrissie Harper created an epetition calling on DEFRA to introduce an offence of vicarious liability for



RENT JACOB SCHUT (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

Common Buzzards are regular targets for illegal persecution. Would the introduction of vicarious liability in England help protect the species?

“The shockwaves of this first prosecution under the new law rattled the plates on many a Scottish landowner's Christmas dinner table”

wildlife crimes in England. That petition easily passed the 10,000 signatures needed to require a response from DEFRA, which was, to say the least, luke-warm. The department stated that it had “no immediate plans to introduce a similar offence in England”.

Perhaps cases like that of the Stody estate, whose (now retired) gamekeeper Allen Lambert was convicted last October of poisoning 10 Common Buzzards and a Sparrowhawk and of possessing illegal poisons, might make politicians think again (bit.ly/bw273NorfolkGamekeeper). The district judge in the case, Peter Veits, said that, like most gamekeepers, Lambert had been left largely to his own devices.

He added: “Those who employ gamekeepers have a strict duty to know what is being done in their name and on their property. In other industries employers as well as employees could face prosecution in such cases, and I hope therefore that this case can serve as a wake-up call to all who run estates as to their duties.” ■



Do this in March

The election manifestos may be published before the end of March, so you could have the chance to see whether any of them contain plans for action on wildlife crime. Vicarious liability for wildlife crime is up and running in Scotland – why are we lagging behind in England, and which political party might offer us the chance to catch up?

Birdwatch World of birds

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NEW!

GEORGIA

■ **1-11 May 2015**
■ **Price: €1,995 plus international flights (from approx €285/£220)**

GEORGIA lies on the border of the Western Palearctic on the eastern side of the Black Sea, between Russia and Turkey. This beautiful former Soviet republic is home to some 350 bird species, of which about half breed. For some birds like the locally endemic Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Grouse, 'Caucasian' Great Rosefinch and Güldenstädt's Redstart, Georgia is the best country to see them.

Besides the areas of special interest for birding in the Caucasus, we will visit two different types of habitats: the steppe region in the south-east of the country and the highland plateau of Javakheti.

Our journey begins in the Georgian capital Tbilisi. The next day we will drive out to the famed montane birding spot of Kazbegi

(currently under the name Stepantsminda), making several stops along the way. One of these will be at the Caucasus Pass, where migrating raptors can sometimes be seen streaming northwards overhead.

The landscape at Kazbegi is varied, with deep gorges, fast-flowing rivers and high mountain peaks which tower at more than 5,000 m. Here we hope to find some of the specialities of the Caucasus Mountains: Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Grouse, 'Caucasian' Great Rosefinch, Güldenstädt's Redstart and Caucasian Chiffchaff. Other great birds that can be seen here are Wallcreeper, Lammergeier, Alpine Accentor and Red-fronted Serin. Plenty of other interesting migratory species pass through as well, including Ortolan Bunting, European Roller and Common Rock Thrush.

Our next destination is located

in the south-east, around Chachuna in the so-called Iori Upland. In spring and early summer, this area is home to a huge number of breeding and migratory birds, including almost 20 species of raptor. We hope to get good views of Black, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Levant and Eurasian Sparrowhawks, Eastern Imperial, Lesser Spotted and Short-toed Eagles, Lanner Falcon and Eurasian Hobby. In the riverside forest we may find species like Black Francolin, Black Stork and Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin.

Finally we'll drive to the Javakheti plateau in the south. The lakes here are rich with breeding birds, and we will look out for Dalmatian and White Pelicans, Common Crane, many duck species, several species of tern including White-winged Black, and both Black-headed and Citrine Wagtails. There is also a large

colony of Armenian Gulls here, with more than 10,000 pairs present.

■ **This tour is operated for Birdwatch by Birding Breaks (registered with the Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam under licence number 54226104). The price includes all transportation within Georgia, accommodation on a full-board basis and guiding. For an itinerary and reservations, call 0031 20 77 92 030 or email info@birdingbreaks.nl.**

BULGARIA

■ **3-10 May 2015 (optional extension until 13 May)**
■ **Price: £1,125 including flights (main tour; extension from £215-£475 depending on number of participants)**

BULGARIA'S unique geographical position where the Balkans meet the Black Sea, near Europe's border with Asia, makes it one of the Western Palearctic's foremost birding destinations.

This special spring tour is an opportunity to see Bulgaria's birds at the height of migration. We will visit hot-spots including Besaparski Hills and the beautiful valley of the River Vacha. These sites should offer such species as Wallcreeper, European Roller, Stone-curlew, Long-legged Buzzard, Calandra Lark, Barred Warbler and Eastern Imperial Eagle.

■ **This tour is operated for Birdwatch by the British-Bulgarian Friendship Society and Balkania Travel (fully bonded and licensed through the CAA, ATOL licence 4465). The price includes return international flights, guiding services, ground transportation and accommodation on a half-board basis. For an itinerary, reservations and full details of the extension, please contact call 020 7536 9400 or email ognian@balkaniatravel.com.**

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Bringing back Britain's lost birds

David Callahan examines the history, pitfalls and successes of Britain's bird reintroductions, and asks what we have learned and which species might benefit from such schemes in the future.

ANJA NUSSE (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



Red Kites flock as meat scraps are distributed at feeding time at Gigrin Farm, Powys, where up to 600 have been known to assemble. Large numbers also congregate in the Chilterns, where the species was introduced in the Nineties, and at a few other sites in Britain – a far cry from the dwindling population formerly restricted to central Wales.

Human activities have had a detrimental effect on those bird species which are unable to adapt quickly enough to share their rapidly changing habitats with us. Since the industrial revolution, this has resulted in many key species disappearing from main habitats or radically declining. This is particularly true of top predators such as raptors and large wading birds, as well as native gamebirds, all of which need a lot of food and space, and inadvertently enable their own persecution due to their size and visibility.

In the 20th century, conservationists responded to the quickening losses of these charismatic species by developing reintroduction programmes, either capturing and re-releasing or relocating species back into the wild, or even developing captive-breeding programmes.

The idea initially came into being with rare mammal species. The first programmes to specifically aid a threatened bird were responses to the worrying declines in Peregrine Falcon numbers in the United States, Poland and Germany, after local extinctions caused by the prevalence of organochlorine pesticides.

Guidelines were devised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 1995, and are usually applied to all schemes in Britain. These state that a species must have

been present in the region of proposed reintroduction, appropriate habitat must exist, the cause of its potential or actual extinction should be identified and eliminated, and the end result must be a “self-maintaining population”. The likely ecological effects must be known and derived from a sound knowledge of the reintroduced species’ biology, and there must be long-term financial and government support in place, along with detailed monitoring of the release and subsequent fate of the birds. Removed eggs and birds should not jeopardise the parent population, and must also be as genetically close as possible to the original population in the region.

Revolving around raptors

In Britain, declining raptors have been at the heart of reintroduction schemes, with Osprey, White-tailed Eagle and Red Kite projects having been very successful and still in progress. The first species to undergo an official scheme was White-tailed Eagle, with a series of Norwegian fledglings being released between 1975–85 (when 82 eaglets were released) and 1993–98 (58 eaglets), on the Argyll islands of Mull and Rum. The species had last bred in Britain on neighbouring Skye in 1907. Smaller schemes had failed to take hold in Argyll in 1959 and on Fair Isle in 1968.

A third – and apparently final – Scottish release project has now been

instituted on the east coast of Scotland, with up to 20 juveniles being released in the Firths of Tay and Forth between 2007 and 2012.

The species is currently being reintroduced to south-west Ireland with some initial success, but a mooted Natural England (then called English Nature) scheme in Suffolk proposed in 2006 met with local opposition and was withdrawn, though lack of funding was cited. A disappointed RSPB said that it still wants to see English sea-eagles fishing again, but the smart money might be in Cumbria as the hub of such a future project, should one be deemed desirable.

Red Kite, reduced to a relict population of a mere handful of pairs in central Wales by the 1980s, would surely have become extinct in Britain if it were not for schemes to reintroduce the species, the first of which began in 1989 in northern Scotland and Buckinghamshire. The success of these pilot projects led to further programmes in 1995 in the east Midlands, 1996 in central Scotland, 1999 at Harewood House, just north of Leeds, West Yorkshire, 2001 in Dumfries and Galloway, and 2004 in the Derwent Valley, Derbyshire. This patchwork of increasing populations has resulted in an estimated breeding total of well over 2,000 pairs. Many of these are resident in their regions of reintroduction, but



While the species re-established itself in Scotland, Osprey was essentially a passage bird in England, despite being a former regular breeder. This changed with the Rutland Water scheme, which has seen up to five pairs breed recently.

DREW BUCKLEY



Like Osprey, White-tailed Eagle is a natural part of Britain's ecology which had been persecuted to extinction in the 19th century. The reintroduced birds have proved lucrative for the tourist industry, and landowners' fears of livestock depredation have proved mostly unfounded.

MARK CAUNT

dispersing individuals can be observed almost anywhere on mainland Britain, with some even wandering to the Continent.

Osprey was lost to Britain by 1840, but naturally recolonised Scotland at Loch Garten, Highland, during the 1950s. As a summer migrant to Britain, its status is perhaps more interesting from a biological point of view. Can the species successfully establish a 'natural' migration route after translocation as well as return to breed when mature? A project started in 1996 at Rutland Water, Leicestershire, has aimed to find out the answers to these questions. An eventual 64 chicks were released, and first breeders from

these established themselves in 2001. At the time of writing up to five breeding pairs have raised a total of 87 chicks, often in mixed pairs of translocated and genuinely wild unringed birds.

Goshawk is a species that has never undergone an official reintroduction, despite being native and almost extinct by the turn of the 20th century. The species was inadvertently re-established by accidentally escaping and deliberately releasing falconers' birds, though because these were unplanned and widely separated many of the local populations of this sedentary species have never connected.

The continuing decline of some other

raptor species, as well as some hindrances to the spread of reintroduced birds, has been laid firmly at the feet of the shooting industry in the last few years. However, this same industry has also been partly behind two native gamebirds' reintroduction.

All in the game

An extensive scheme to re-establish Black Grouse in the Upper Derwent Valley, in Derbyshire's Peak District, began in 2003 in the hope of replacing a population which was lost there just three years previously. Management and monitoring has helped some natural local Black Grouse populations recover,



DREW BUCKLEY



JAMES LOWEN

The use of naturally occurring species for sport can often confuse the issue of reintroduction, as large numbers of birds are released specifically for shooting. However, Black Grouse schemes have proved effective on a local scale.

The reintroduction of Capercaillies from Scandinavia (viewed as the same subspecies as the extinct native British birds) has given the species a vulnerable foothold in Scotland.

but the species is still in decline in many regions of Britain, and must surely be a candidate for further schemes in the near future.

Grey Partridge, a Red-listed popular gamebird, has been the victim of intensifying agriculture, compounded by loss of invertebrate food and parasitical infections caught from captive-reared Pheasants, across most of Europe. There has been an 80 per cent decline in territories during the last 25 years, and it is truly a species in peril in Britain. Despite this, there is no site-specific scheme to reintroduce the species, as its status as a legal game species confuses the issue.

Captive-bred Grey Partridges are released by shooting estates on an annual basis, but despite this about 90 per cent of released birds don't make it to the following year, and in 2012, after the worst breeding season on record, estates were asked to refrain from shooting the species, though this was not a legal requirement. Hunting organisations claim that taking 30 per cent of the population is sustainable, but this is clearly not the case as numbers have continuously declined.

The figures of how many are released each year and how many are shot are difficult to uncover, but it must also be said that shooting interests do 'restock' the birds from captivity, though their choice of word is rather telling. It is possible that individual estates and businesses do slow the decline with released birds, but it is also true that the species' 10 per cent survival rate is always largely blamed on natural predators with little evidence, rather than shooters.

Farmland backtracking

Other schemes have been launched to either nip a potential extinction in the bud, or bolster numbers of a native species by installing populations in other areas that it previously inhabited, in the hope that these localised ranges might one day reconnect. As farming methods changed, Corncrake went from being distributed virtually nationwide to marginalisation at the very extremes of north and western Scotland over 150 years or so. From 1992, conservation measures have helped increase the population in Scotland substantially, but without any notable range expansion. To aid this, 2002 saw a more high-tech and intensive project begin in the Nene Washes, Cambridgeshire, using captive-bred birds from nearby Pensthorpe Conservation Trust, and it has had some breeding success.

Curlew has a relict population



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

Despite being a natural top predator of Britain's woodland ecosystems, Goshawk is thought to have re-established itself from both accidental and deliberate release of falconers' birds. No genetic research has yet been done to find out how much they are purely of the main European subspecies.

in Devon, but was originally found all over southern England. With suitable habitat in Cornwall, but little indication of the population to the east recovering, a reintroduction scheme was piloted in 2004, when a number of Cirl Bunting chicks were taken from core-range nests in Devon and hand-reared in Paignton Zoo, before being released into the wild. By 2012, 40 breeding pairs had been established in Cornwall in the first-ever passerine reintroduction in Europe. Passerine translocations and releases are commonplace in other parts of the world and the lessons learnt through these schemes have been successfully applied in Devon and Cornwall.

Common Crane is another species well known in medieval times that eventually naturally re-established a breeding population, with a small colony in Norfolk since the late Seventies. Though it is still early days, developments at the project show cause for optimism (see pages 41-43).

Great Bustard was a key part of the British avifauna in the Middle Ages, but the landscape has changed so much since then that many birders and conservationists initially doubted that the species was a good candidate for reintroduction. The Great Bustard Project was set up independently,

Cirl Bunting is on the western edge of its Eurasian range in Devon, but a recent reintroduction scheme has seen the species tentatively establish itself in Cornwall.



GRAEME WILLETTS

SIX POSSIBLE FUTURE REINTRODUCTIONS?

Hawfinch's numbers have diminished rapidly in Britain, perhaps due to the loss of many of the mature native trees on which it relies. Could it be a candidate for a reintroduction scheme in the future?



DAVID KJAER

NONE of these scarce species have been trialled or even suggested by conservationists as candidates for reintroduction in their historical haunts, but here we speculate on which species might respond well to such projects.

Black-tailed Godwit First lost as a breeding bird in 1885, this species has regained a toe-hold in Britain on Cambridgeshire's Nene Washes. With knowledge derived from the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust's international Spoon-billed Sandpiper 'rescue' project and the reintroduction of Corncrake, perhaps this could be on the radar for a captive-breeding 'boost'?

European Turtle Dove The reintroduction of migratory species raises many difficulties, but the apparent initial though slow success of the Corncrake reintroduction proves that it is possible – with care. A prime candidate if its decline continues is this iconic species, now a rarity in most parts of the country and declining across Europe.

Savi's Warbler Edge-of-range migratory passerines are less likely to be considered for reintroduction as their presence in Britain tends to fluctuate, and this species and others such as Marsh Warbler would probably partially colonise again with a warming climate.

Red-backed Shrike Formerly widespread in lowland Britain, this species is known in the cagebird trade and has certainly been bred in captivity on the Continent. Perhaps it would be a candidate for a 'kick start' as no more than two pairs breed on an irregular basis in Britain at present.

Willow and Marsh Tits This would have to involve translocation from a core breeding area, as both these declining species have uniquely British subspecies. Both British 'chickadees' are very sensitive to habitat conditions, but will use garden feeders. The reasons for their decline are largely unknown, and would need to be much more thoroughly understood before any captive breeding ensued.

Hawfinch The RSPB is investigating the rapid decline of Britain's largest finch, but the causes remain elusive. Its population is at a similar level to Corncrake or Cirl Bunting, but it may not be suitable for translocation or captive breeding as cagebird breeders say that it is very difficult to raise indoors, and has to be hand-fed after about four days (assuming the female can be persuaded to lay).

initially to the tacit disapproval of some conservation organisations. The genetic closeness guideline of the IUCN was a criterion that the Great Bustard Project debatably failed to meet, as birds have been translocated from Russia and Spain, two genetically distinct populations, without at first attempting to find out which was the closest to the now extinct British population.

Clearly, the viability of a reintroduction varies with every species considered, but the possibilities exist across all families of birds and all lifestyles, with enough experience and research. However, the mutating influence of human beings on natural behaviours and habitats not only necessitates reintroductions in the first place but also controls their outcomes. The amount of knowledge and research needed to justify such projects has to be both detailed and expert, and this takes time and manpower – in other words, substantial amounts of money and commitment.

That said, there are other species in Britain that may soon need measures other than mere legal protection and quarantine on a nature reserve. The *Birds of Conservation Concern 3* document, which compiles data from all the major conservation organisations' bird surveys, lists 178 'species of conservation concern', out of the 246 species assessed – that's the majority of our regularly breeding birds. A 'leg up' will surely be considered for a substantial portion of these, should declines continue as it seems they will. Further potential candidates are featured in the box on page 39, but others such as Ring Ouzel and Dotterel – perhaps outlandish suggestions right now – may seem eminently sensible in a couple of decades. ■

DAVID KIAER



Before the Second World War, most of Britain's countryside rasped to the breeding call of Corncrake in spring, but the intensification of agriculture put paid to that. Reintroduction schemes in Cambridgeshire, Scotland and Ireland now show signs of turning the species' fortunes around.



The privately run reintroduction scheme for Great Bustard in Wiltshire has proved controversial for some mainstream conservationists, many of whom ask if enough habitat still exists for the species, and question the genetic 'closeness' of Russian stock to the now-extinct British population.

DAVID KIAER

The reintroduced Common Cranes are settling into their new home on the Somerset Levels.

The great crane release

JOHN CRISPIN
(WWW.THEGREATCRANEPROJECT.ORG.UK)

A natural recolonisation gave conservationists hope that Common Crane could become properly re-established in Britain after a 400-year absence. **Damon Bridge**, Project Manager for the Great Crane Project, recounts the programme's success.

Although Common Crane is widespread in continental Europe and has a current world population of around 360,000 individuals, there have been significant historical declines in the western European population. In Britain, hunting during the Middle Ages and subsequent drainage of wetlands led to the species' loss by around 1600.

A natural recolonisation began in the Norfolk Broads in the 1980s, with the first successfully fledged chick in 1982. Despite a lot of conservation effort, however, breeding success was slow over the next 14 years, with just four chicks fledging by 1996; the total population was only just in double figures. Fortunes changed over

the next 10 years, though, and 28 chicks successfully fledged. By 2006, the number of wintering birds in the area had grown to an estimated 36 birds.

The reason that these birds established a resident population is thought to be due to migratory behaviour in cranes being learnt, rather than innate. Over the same period, cranes also started to establish a year-round presence at other sites on the western edges of their ranges in France and The Netherlands.

This apparent permanent return to Britain gave encouragement to conservationists, who started making ambitious plans to give the birds a 'helping hand' through reintroduction. Such programmes had been undertaken

since the 1980s with Whooping and Mississippi Sandhill Cranes in America, and the 'puppet-rearing' methods, needed to undertake a successful hand rearing and subsequent release into the wild, were well documented.

The groundwork

In 2007 the Great Crane Project conservation partners – the RSPB, the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) and the Pensthorpe Conservation Trust – commissioned a translocation feasibility study to find the most



At the nest site in Brandenburg, Germany, the eggs are weighed and measured (left and above) to determine their age prior to collection.



PHOTOS: DAMON BRIDGE (WWW.THEGREATCRANEPROJECT.ORG.UK)

REINTRODUCTIONS



After hatching, the chicks begin life in these early-stage rearing facilities.

The chicks require continuous care. Carers wear special costumes that cover them from head to foot, hiding the human form. This is necessary to ensure the birds react appropriately to humans once released.



suitable site for a reintroduction. An initial long-list of 11 potential sites was shortened to three after further assessment of their suitability.

A number of factors were considered: availability of invertebrate-rich chick-rearing habitat; presence of suitable breeding zones; availability of winter feeding areas; likelihood of disturbance from humans; disruption by aircraft; density of potential predators; presence of powerlines; availability of suitable agri-environment schemes; and proximity to current areas used by cranes. Following more detailed fieldwork and further analysis, the Somerset Levels and Moors – a 64,000-ha area of peat-dominated, low-lying land in the south-west of Britain – was selected for the project.

After funding was secured from Viridor Credits Environmental Company in the summer of 2009, the project moved up a gear. The necessary agreements and consents were sought from DEFRA, and an arrangement was drawn up between conservationists and the state authority for the Schorfheide-Chorin Biosphere Reserve in Brandenburg, Germany, to provide the project with up to 30 eggs per year for five years. Around 400 pairs of cranes breed annually in this part of Germany in an area similar in size to the Somerset Levels and Moors; it is one of the species' densest breeding populations in the whole of Europe.

In spring 2010 the first 24 eggs were collected and driven 800 miles to a purpose-built biosecure rearing unit at Slimbridge WWT, Gloucestershire, where they were hatched and hand reared. This process was repeated for the next four years; a total of 121 eggs were imported, with 114 going on to hatch and 93 of these young birds being released onto the Somerset Levels and Moors.

At approximately 12 weeks old, the juvenile cranes were driven to a release pen constructed on West Sedgemoor RSPB, Somerset, and released into a netted aviary. After three weeks, they were led out into a two-ha predator-proof pen, from where they were free to fly.

For the first few weeks after release, the project team continued to work with the cranes to teach the birds to avoid predators and people – a method that appears to have been very successful. It is now difficult to get within 300 m of the cranes in Somerset, and they have been seen to exhibit the appropriate response to predators such as foxes.

Checking up

All the released birds have been ringed with a three-colour combination on the right leg, enabling individual identification. The majority have also been fitted with leg-mounted radio tags. In combination, these have made possible 'on-the-ground' monitoring by project staff and a team of around 40 local volunteers from autumn release through to late spring each year. This has been instrumental in helping to maintain the high survival rate, as researchers have been able to intervene if necessary, capture, treat and release injured birds, and adapt management plans to accommodate the needs of the cranes.

Back-pack mounted GPS data-loggers, leg-mounted satellite platform transmitter terminals (PTTs) and leg-mounted GSM data-loggers have also been used. This high-tech kit has enabled the remote gathering of detailed location and movement data which will be analysed over the next three years through a PhD project, which is also working with cranes from the wider British population.

The youngsters often fight, so are introduced to each other slowly, allowing them to form a loose social group known as a cohort.



Once they are old enough – about 12 weeks – the cranes are carefully put into special crates for transportation by road to a netted aviary on the Somerset Levels, ahead of moving to an open pen from where they can fly.



By late autumn, the cranes are well established on the levels and moors, roaming across the landscape during the day and often finding safe roost sites on flooded fields.

GET INVOLVED

THE Great Crane Project is looking for volunteers to assist with the protection of breeding pairs in Somerset. If this is something that appeals to you, please get in touch via www.thegreatcraneproject.org.uk.

The interactive project website will continue to tell the story of the released cranes into the future. There is a sightings page on the website and birders are encouraged to send in any records of cranes in Somerset to help with the ongoing work.

You can also follow the project on Facebook (www.facebook.com/thegreatcraneproject) and Twitter (www.twitter.com/thecraneproject).

JOHN CRISPIN (WWW.THEGREATCRANeproject.ORG.UK)

Staff and volunteers have put particular effort into monitoring moulting birds (cranes undergo a complete primary moult every three years or so, rendering them flightless for five weeks) and carrying out species-protection watches of nesting pairs.

In addition to the work with the birds themselves, habitat creation has been carried out to provide new areas where the cranes may breed one day on five wet grassland sites on the Somerset Levels and Moors, with habitats enhanced on a further four and additional works planned for summer 2015. These new sites not only provide space for breeding cranes, but also become wetland biodiversity hot-spots in their own right, attractive to breeding ducks, Water Rail and possibly Spotted Crake too, as well as a host of ditch and pool invertebrates and plant species.

Community engagement activities – to build local support for wetlands and wetland wildlife – have also been carried out throughout the project, including the involvement of volunteers for rearing, monitoring and species-protection work, a ‘crane champion’ education programme in nearby primary schools – which have named many of the cranes – and collaborative creative arts community projects.

The future

The project set out with the short-term aim of hand-rearing 100 cranes to release over the five-year period 2010-2014, with the long-term target of establishing a resident, self-sustaining population of 20 breeding pairs of cranes in south-west Britain by 2025.

Some 93 cranes have been reared to release, and although slightly short of the initial target, survival has been very

high – currently at 81 per cent – and the initial phase of the project is now complete. The 75 surviving cranes represent a doubling of the British population, which now stands at around 150 birds.

Of the birds that have not survived, two died through collision or suspected collision with powerlines, four became ill and subsequently either died or were killed and scavenged by predators, two have been found dead with the cause of death inconclusive, and eight birds are ‘missing’, with their current status unknown.

A group of nine individuals appear quite settled at Slimbridge, with the remaining 62 on the levels and moors. Spring 2014 saw the cranes become a lot more exploratory, with non-breeding birds being recorded in South Wales, Dorset, Wiltshire, Shropshire and Staffordshire – areas where they may in time find suitable breeding opportunities. We also expect that the birds will soon start to mix with those from other breeding areas such as the Humberhead Levels, the Nene Washes, Lakenheath and the Norfolk Broads.

Two pairs made breeding attempts on the Somerset Levels and Moors in 2014, but sadly both lost their clutches – presumably to ground predators. A pair nesting at Slimbridge WWT hatched two chicks, but they failed to fledge – another victim of predation. However, this is quite normal for cranes, which are long-lived birds with many breeding years ahead of them.

This spring, 45 of the surviving 75 birds will be at breeding age of at least three years old. This equates to a possible 22 pairs setting up territories and going on to make nesting attempts – so there is potentially a very exciting time coming up, and a great future for Common Cranes in Britain. ■

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6th March 2015

Black-headed and Bonaparte's Gulls

PHOTO GUIDE



1 Adult Bonaparte's Gull (centre, front) with adult Black-headed Gulls (Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire, 10 February 2005). While scanning through a large flock of Black-headed Gulls, a slightly smaller bird catches the eye. The grey upperparts are a shade darker than the surrounding 'Black-heads' and the bird shows an obvious grey wash to the neck sides and nape. The bill, comparatively short, appears entirely black at a distance in comparison to the varying red of the Black-headed Gulls. Similarly, the legs are relatively short and an obvious pale pink – rather than deep red as in Black-headed. This combination of features quickly identifies the bird in question as an adult Bonaparte's Gull.

PROFILE



JOSH JONES is News Manager at BirdGuides. He has been obsessed by all things birdy since he was young, and gulls are a favourite subject.

With Bonaparte's Gull being increasingly reported in Britain and Ireland, the time has never been better to find your own individual of this beautifully monochrome species. However, to the untrained eye it is easily confusable with the exponentially commoner Black-headed Gull. *Josh Jones* guides you through the plumages of all ages of both species, to make it much easier for you to pull this diminutive American larid out of the pack, all year round.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Similar in size, structure and appearance, Black-headed and Bonaparte's Gulls are essentially equivalents primarily separated by range: the former inhabits the Old World, the latter the New.

Black-headed Gull

This species breeds extensively from western Europe eastwards across Eurasia to the Russian Far East. Most are migratory (or at least dispersive). Birds are present in Europe year round, although many move as far south as sub-Saharan Africa, while eastern birds head south to winter along the coasts of the Indian Ocean, China and Japan.

The species is extremely common, with a worldwide population estimated as high as nine million birds (BirdLife International 2012). Britain represents an important cornerstone for Black-headed Gull, with an estimated 140,000 breeding pairs. In winter, the population swells to around two million individuals.

As such a common and recognisable bird, attention is seldom paid to the intricacies of Black-headed Gull plumage – a shame, for it is a beautiful and intelligent species that can be hugely entertaining when studied closely.

Adults exhibit pale grey upperparts (Kodak Grey Scale 4-5(6)), white underparts and black primaries throughout the year. In breeding plumage (February/March-July), the 'hood' is not black, but dark chocolate brown. In winter the hood is lost, with darker markings retained around and above the eye, as well as on the ear coverts, with darker markings extending onto the crown in some individuals. Bare part coloration also varies depending on the season: in

summer, the bill and legs are a deep red, while in winter this pales, the legs becoming more scarlet-red, and the bill, although slightly more variable, generally exhibiting a contrasting, almost blackish, tip.

In flight, adults show a predominately grey upperwing, though the outer four primaries are largely white with contrasting black tips. These extend to P4 and create a noticeable dark trailing edge on the upperside. The underwing appears darker, with the white more restricted on the underside of the outer primaries and black considerably more extensive, creating a 'shadow' effect; this gradually lightens through the inner primaries and outer secondaries to a pale grey.

Immatures are considerably more variable, with time of year and state of moult causing significant differences in appearance. Juveniles (June-August) quickly begin to moult their warm sandy-brown scapulars to a more adult-like grey, while any brown feathering on the head, neck and breast moults to white. The brownish lesser and median coverts are nevertheless retained in first-winter plumage, as are the brown tertials.

In their first winter, youngsters exhibit a head pattern similar to adults, with variable black markings on the ear coverts as well as around the eye and crown. Bare part coloration varies from orange through to scarlet-red, the bill always exhibiting a blackish tip. By spring, most immatures obtain a partial chocolate-brown head in first-summer plumage, though this is variable and a minority retain a winter-patterned head throughout.

In flight, first-winters are distinguishable by the brownish wing coverts

creating a faint 'bar' on the upperwing, while the darker secondaries and inner primaries create a broad, dark and diffuse trailing edge. Dark markings are also typically more prominent in the primaries and primary coverts, though this is variable. The tail generally exhibits a neat black band across the tip, though this becomes broken as moult commences.

Bonaparte's Gull

Though superficially similar in appearance to Black-headed Gull in all plumages, Bonaparte's can generally be recognised by its slightly smaller size, more lightweight build and consequently more buoyant and dainty jizz – such that it is almost a cross between Black-headed and Little Gull in this respect.

Bonaparte's Gull breeds widely across Canada from Hudson Bay west to Alaska, wintering in suitable habitat across the 'Lower 48' states of the US, being most numerous in the east. The world population is estimated to be in excess of 500,000 birds and is increasing.

The species' vagrancy potential in western Europe is long established. It is the second most regular Nearctic gull species to be seen in Britain and Ireland, with 278 accepted records by the end of 2013 and a noticeable upturn in regularity since the turn of the century. Vagrants can occur at all times of year, although records are most numerous between March and May, this significant increase coinciding with northbound Black-headed Gull migration. The latter is almost always the 'carrier species' for vagrant Bonaparte's.

At rest, adults superficially resemble Black-headed Gull, but are smaller with shorter, flesh-pink legs and a slender

black bill. A pale grey wash is usually noticeable on the nape in winter, particularly in neutral light, while the upperparts average a very slightly darker grey (Kodak Grey Scale (4)5-7) to Black-headed. In breeding plumage (April-August) the hood becomes charcoal black and the legs turn a bright red.

In flight, the upperwing is similar to Black-headed Gull, although the slightly darker grey upperparts mean that the white outer primaries appear more contrasted. The underwing, however, is strikingly different, with black restricted to the outer primary tips only, creating a thin but well-defined trailing edge – the rest is almost white, appearing nearly translucent.

As with Black-headed Gull, juvenile Bonaparte's commences moult shortly after leaving the nest, and thus fresh juveniles are never seen on this side of the Atlantic. First-winter birds are similar to Black-headed Gull but exhibit a more distinct, sharply defined black trailing edge to the wing and blacker markings on the wing coverts and tertials, as well as the greyish wash to the nape. The bill is mainly black (though often slightly paler at the base) and the legs are a pale pink.

In flight, the black trailing edge to the wing contrasts sharply with the otherwise whitish underwing. Unlike Black-headed Gull, most individuals retain a winter-patterned head in the first summer; only a small minority of birds develop a hood, and even then it is generally quite patchy in appearance. ■

JARGON BUSTER

The Kodak Grey Scale, widely referred to in gull ID, is a standardised colour separation guide for shades of grey; the numbers in brackets indicate intermediate tones.

2



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

2 Juvenile Black-headed Gull (Seaforth, Lancashire, 5 July 2007). Fresh juvenile Black-headed Gulls such as this are generally only seen in early to mid-summer, as fledged birds commence moult into first-winter plumage soon after leaving the nest. The mid-brown feathering on the head and neck is quickly replaced with white, while grey, adult-like scapulars will soon succeed the largely brown feathers displayed on this individual. Juveniles exhibit variable flesh-coloured bare parts. Juvenile Bonaparte's Gull is not illustrated as, unless a pair was exceptionally breeding in Europe, this plumage would not be encountered on this side of the Atlantic.

3



JOSH JONES

3 First-winter Black-headed Gull (Hyde Park, London, 19 January 2015). A classic first-winter in all respects, with relatively long, reddish-orange legs and a reddish-orange bill with dark outer third. The ear covert and head markings are fairly indistinct, the hindneck is white and the upperparts pale grey. The wing coverts and tertial markings are a warm mid-brown colour. The black tail band is just visible.

4



STEVE ARLOW (WWW.BIRDERSPLAYGROUND.CO.UK)

4 First-winter Bonaparte's Gull (Texas, USA, 10 April 2009). Smaller and daintier than Black-headed, the pale pink legs are evidently shorter than that species, while the bill is slender and black. The grey neck sides and nape are obvious and the upperpart coloration is a shade of grey darker than in Black-headed. The wing coverts and tertials are a darker (almost blackish) brown.

5



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

5 First-winter Black-headed Gull (Seaforth, Lancashire, 3 January 2012). The secondaries and tips of the inner primaries are dark grey, creating a diffuse dark trailing edge to the upperwing. The outer primaries are white with black tips and fringing. The primary coverts show little or no black markings (compare with the Bonaparte's in image 6). The brown covert bar is fairly distinct on this individual, though this is variable and can be much less apparent in some birds. The bill is clearly orange with a dark tip, while the neat black tail band further confirms age.

6



GARY THOBURN

6 First-winter Bonaparte's (Cheddar Reservoir, Somerset, 25 March 2008). The crisp beauty of first-winter Bonaparte's Gull is encapsulated in this image. The black trailing edge to the primaries and secondaries is obviously neater and more clearly demarcated than in Black-headed Gull, giving the wing a cleaner look. The very dark brown wing coverts can look blackish at a distance, creating an obvious thin dark bar. Note also the greater amount of black markings in the primary coverts, typical of this species (though some can be as white as in Black-headed Gull). The slender, black bill is also apparent, while the white head contrasts with the slightly greyer hindneck.

7



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

7 First-summer Black-headed Gull (Seaforth, Lancashire, 1 May 2010). Arguably the most significant feature of this individual is the full chocolate-brown hood, a feature obtained by a good proportion of Black-headed Gulls in their first summer but only very rarely by Bonaparte's of the same age. Note the grey underside to the secondaries and almost blackish underside to the inner primaries, creating a 'shadow' effect on the underwing which sharply contrasts with the white underside of the outer primaries.

8



JAMES LOWEN

8 First-summer Bonaparte's Gull (Crossness, London, 22 May 2012). The bright white underwing appears almost translucent and, coupled with the neatly contrasting thin black trailing edge to the primaries and secondaries, gives an appearance entirely different from Black-headed Gull. Add to that the almost wholly dark bill (with subtly paler base), along with the pale pink legs, and the identification of this bird is straightforward. Note the retention of a winter-type head pattern, typical of most first-summer Bonaparte's Gulls.

9



JAMES LOWEN

9 First-summer Bonaparte's Gull (right) with Black-headed Gull (left) (Crossness, London, 22 May 2012). Vagrant Bonaparte's are invariably found among Black-headed Gull flocks, and seeing the species side by side like this is instructional. Features that separate the Bonaparte's on the right include the marginally smaller size, slightly darker grey upperparts, black bill and obvious winter-type head pattern in comparison to the Black-headed on the left, which is gaining a partial brown hood and also shows an obviously dark red bill.

10



JOSH JONES

10 Adult Black-headed Gull (Kensington Gardens, London, 30 January 2015). Black-headed Gulls are very attractive birds. This typical winter adult displays a red bill which darkens towards the tip (this contrast is often much more obvious), diffuse dark markings around and behind the eye, and deep red legs. The upperwing is largely grey, though the outer four primaries are white and the black primary tips extend inwards to P4. Note how the underwing appears darkest at the blackish inner primaries, which create a 'shadow' effect contrasting with the white of the outer primaries.

11



JOSH JONES

11 Adult Bonaparte's Gull (Eastbourne, East Sussex, 4 February 2013). The upperwing is superficially similar to Black-headed Gull: pale grey but with the outer four primaries largely white with black tips, these becoming more diffuse and grey by P3-4. The big difference from Black-headed is the underwing, which is largely whitish save for the contrasting, well-defined dark tips to the primaries. Note the small, black bill, the clear grey wash to the nape and neck sides forming an unbroken extension of the pale grey mantle, which contrasts with the white base colour of the head, and the well-defined black ear spot, as well as the shorter-necked, more 'squat' appearance. The pale pink legs and feet are also obvious.

12



12 Adult Black-headed Gull (Oksky, Russia, 17 May 2006). The chocolate-brown hood of this breeding-plumaged Black-headed Gull makes it instantly recognisable. The strong sunlight ensures that the underwing appears paler than normal (almost translucent), but the contrast between the white outer and the blackish inner primaries is nevertheless obvious and ensures that the inner 'hand' of the bird is darkest – on Bonaparte's, the underwing would look consistently white.

13



JAMES LOWEN

13 Adult Bonaparte's Gull (Crossness, London, 7 July 2013). Summer-plumaged Bonaparte's Gulls are beautiful birds. Note the charcoal-black hood broken only by the broad white 'eyelids', as well as the solid black bill. In this post-breeding bird, the legs and feet are a pinkish-red – in late spring, breeding-plumaged birds sport bright red legs. The gleaming white underwing is obvious, with the sharply demarcated black trailing edge to the outer primaries the only dark part.

14



JAMES LOWEN

14 Adult Bonaparte's Gull (centre) with Black-headed Gulls (Crossness, London, 7 July 2013). Once again, note the consistent black of the bill and hood of Bonaparte's in comparison to the deep red bills and faded brown hoods of the surrounding moulting Black-headed Gulls. The smaller size and daintier structure of the Bonaparte's is also evident, while the grey upperparts are a shade darker than in the similarly positioned Black-headed Gull at the front.

Find your own Black-headed and Bonaparte's Gulls

THE 278 accepted British and Irish records (and counting) of **Bonaparte's Gull** mean that it has now occurred in most counties.

The species migrates in a mostly south-easterly direction from its breeding grounds in central and western Canada and Alaska to winter on the east coast of north America. This is probably why the majority of records on this side of the Atlantic derive from Cornwall and Devon, with a good number also being logged in south-western Ireland and the Outer Hebrides. A significant proportion of Bonaparte's Gulls also make their way up the Irish Sea, and there is another concentration of records in north-west England.

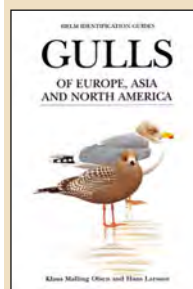
Despite this, the species can turn up almost anywhere, usually accompanying the ubiquitous **Black-headed Gull** flocks and mostly at coastal locations. You can maximise your chance of connecting with the species – just as with finding rare large white-headed gulls – by getting into the habit of spending time scrutinising your local gull roosts and coastal feeding and bathing gatherings; it may turn up inland occasionally, too.

Spring is the best time to look. There is a clear peak in April, and consequently half the records are of breeding-plumaged adults, though these tend to stand out more from the larid throng. There are plenty of reports in January and February, too, but numbers from other months are low – though it is still possible at any time, of course.

Bonaparte's Gulls are still very rare, albeit annual, but Black-headed Gulls are present in numbers year-round. Breeding gatherings make a spectacle, and there are sizeable colonies on the Ribble Estuary (SD 7038; 20,000 pairs), along with inland colonies at Lough Neagh (J 0370) and Lough Beg (H 9796), Co Antrim (33,000) and Sunbiggin Tarn, Cumbria (NY 6707; 25,000), as well as smaller colonies on the Alde-Ore Estuary, Suffolk (TM 3975), Coquet Island, Northumberland (NU 2904), and on the Alt Estuary, Lancashire (SD 3724).

Outside the breeding season, large gatherings of Black-headed Gulls (possibly holding rarer species) can be seen on the mud of almost any river estuary at low tide, as well as any landfill site – keep 'em peeled! ■

FURTHER READING



Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America by Klaus Malling Olsen and Hans Larsson (Christopher Helm)

This comprehensive guide covers 43 species of gull and includes some of the most familiar species as well as some little-known and globally threatened rarities. The thorough text is accompanied by excellent

colour plates and more than 800 photos. The book incorporates extensive information on habitat, range and breeding behaviour.

Buy for just £45, or £44 for subscribers; SRP £50.

To order see page 77, call 020 8881 0550 or visit the Birdwatch Bookshop at www.birdwatch.co.uk/store.

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This is precisely the reason that you've stopped to stare at the small gull now resting on the surface of your local park lake. It's probably just a Black-headed Gull, and that's what you assumed when you saw it land out of the corner of your eye – yet it struck you as slightly odd.

Now you need to sort it one way or the other, so using the information gleaned from Josh Jones's detailed advice in this guide, it's time to make the call.

How to enter

Once you think you have the right answer, let us know the identity of the mystery gull in this photo. Go to bit.ly/bw273GullQuiz to enter, but be quick as the competition closes on 13 March. The answer will be available online at www.birdwatch.co.uk/win from 16 March, and the first randomly chosen reader with the correct answer will win a copy of *Frontiers in Birding* by Martin Garner and friends. ■



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Eye Relief	20-18mm
Nearest Focus Distance	4m
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Q=

Should all conservationists be vegetarian?

YES



Rebecca Armstrong has been vegetarian for almost 30 years. She doesn't wear leather or fur, doesn't own a car and cycles to work.

It's a pretty safe bet that most of us care about the environment and want to protect wildlife. But if we're serious about being conservationists, I think it's time to have a good look at the food on our plates and ditch the steak. A true conservationist has to be vegetarian, I believe, and here's why.

Global meat production in 2012 – the most recent year for which definite figures are available – was 304.2 million tonnes; this is predicted to grow to 311.6 million tonnes in 2014. That equates to some 65 billion animals slaughtered every year. In the UK alone, over 2.5 million land animals are slaughtered daily. Moreover, meat consumption is expected to double in the next 40 years. It's having a huge effect on our planet, and it's only going to get worse.

Climate change is one of – if not

USDA NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)



The livestock sector contributes a surprising amount to the production of greenhouse gases – more even than the world transport sector.

NO



Stephen Moss is a naturalist, author and TV producer who has enjoyed eating meat all his life. He prefers local patchwatching to long-haul twitching.

At first sight, the obvious answer appears to be yes. In a world where the Earth's natural resources – including food and energy – are in short supply, and our over-use of them is contributing to problems such as global climate change and habitat loss, it would appear to be a sensible option. As conservationists – and birders – we have a duty to look closely at the way our lives impact on the wildlife we love.

But I'm going to argue – for several different reasons – against the proposal.

I do so first because it would be hypocritical not to, as I have always eaten meat and plan to continue doing so. I enjoy it – as I enjoy many other kinds of food – and it is part of my upbringing and culture, as it is for the

vast majority of people in Britain, including many conservationists and birders.

What we eat is surely one of the most personal of all aspects of our lives, so if anyone chooses to be vegetarian (for ethical, health or any other reasons), that's fine by me. Likewise, though, I don't expect them to criticise my choice.

Like many people, I don't take kindly to the holier-than-thou attitude of a small minority of vegetarians, who wear their eating habits as some kind of badge of pride, even as a rebuke to those of us who continue to eat meat.

The reason this attitude annoys me is because it is short-sighted and hypocritical. It's short-sighted because in the scheme of things eating meat is



GLENN BARTLEY (WWW.BIRDMAGENCY.COM)

Lulu's Tody-Flycatcher is certainly a striking bird, but will you remember seeing it in 20 years' time and is it worth the carbon footprint?

YES



the – biggest threats the environment is currently facing. Most of us would identify the world transport sector as the main culprit. We're all advised to leave the car at home wherever possible, as well as to make other small changes like turning the thermostat down by a couple of degrees.

But how many people consider giving up meat as a way to combat global warming? According to a recent report (Bailey *et al* 2014), the livestock sector is responsible for 14.5 per cent of production of greenhouse gases. This is more than the emissions produced from powering all the world's road vehicles, trains, ships and aeroplanes combined. The paper argues that the goal of keeping the global temperature rise below 2°C will be "off the table" unless there is a change in consumption patterns.

The carbon footprint of a meat-eater is about double that of a vegetarian (Scarborough *et al* 2014). A vegan's carbon footprint is even smaller, about one-third that of a meat-eater. Cutting down on the amount of meat you eat

The Amazon rainforest is one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet. Habitat loss has caused the local extinction of 26 plant and animal species.



NEIL PALMER (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

NO



just one of many aspects of our lives that cause harm to the planet and its wildlife. And it's hypocritical because vegetarians themselves contribute to that harm, in all but one of the ways that meat-eaters do.

Take animal welfare. I appreciate that some vegetarians and all vegans avoid not only meat but anything made from animal products – but most don't. Many continue to wear leather shoes, for example.

And what about the rest of our lifestyles? If you are a vegetarian, do you drive a car using fossil fuels that contribute to global warming? Do you eat bread made from wheat grown on land that has been intensively farmed, to the detriment of our birds and other farmland wildlife? Have you ever twitched a rare bird; or indeed travelled by plane to see birds abroad?

Do you use electricity or gas, and if so, does most of this come from non-renewable sources? Do you live in a (bought or rented) home, whose

construction involved vast amounts of energy?

Do you have a pension, life insurance or any other investments? If so, are any of these supporting companies causing damage to the environment? Do you pay taxes? If so, do any of these contribute to the nature-unfriendly policies of successive British governments?

And finally, do you have children – each of which, during their lifetimes, will probably cause the same amount of environmental damage as you?

If, as a vegetarian, you answered yes to any of these questions, then I'm afraid you are causing far more damage to the natural environment than anyone ever could by a modest consumption of meat. And yes, I hold my hand up – I do all of those things too.

You might consider such arguments to be absurd, and you'd have a point. If any of us stopped to add up the environmental damage we each cause during our lives, then we probably wouldn't bother to get out of bed in the morning. So let's all try to look at the positive ways we can help the environment, and if we are still meat-eaters, perhaps embrace some



JUSTING (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)



will obviously help matters, but becoming vegetarian is even better. According to World Wildlife Fund researchers, global vegetarianism by 2050 would result in a 17 per cent reduction in the output of carbon dioxide, a 21 per cent fall in nitrous oxide and a 24 per cent reduction in methane – the three most potent greenhouse gasses.

Deforestation is another major driver of global warming, and one of the main causes of deforestation is livestock – particularly the production of feed and grazing for cattle. But it's not just about climate change. Huge swathes of habitat are being destroyed in order to produce more and more meat.

The Amazon is the most biodiverse area on the planet; some 1,300 bird species, including many endemic and endangered species, are found there. This figure is dwarfed by the 40,000 plants and 100,000 invertebrates. But great areas of the Amazon are being lost to development, and the plants and animals that rely on it are being lost too. According to a 2009 UN Environmental Programme report, the Amazon region had lost 17 per cent of its forest, about 857,666 sq km, in the 50 years to 2005, leading to the extinction of 26 animal and plant species. If deforestation

continues at its current rate in Brazil alone, at least 15 mammal, 30 bird and 10 amphibian species could die out locally by 2050.

The number one culprit is livestock production, in the form of grazing for cattle or growing soy to make feed; this accounts for 80 per cent of deforestation. All this so that we can tuck into a hamburger (50 billion are eaten in the US alone every year). But if the world were to turn vegetarian, pasture areas would be reduced by 80 per cent, or 2,700 mega-hectares – although this would be slightly offset by an extra 2 Mha needed for arable land required for direct crop consumption.

If Joni Mitchell were to write *Big Yellow Taxi* today, it wouldn't be a parking lot that replaced paradise; it would be endless fields of cud-chewing cows and soy plants.

Water is a vital and limited resource. Some one billion people don't have sufficient access to clean water. Livestock production accounts for more than 8 per cent of the world's water use, and the projected increase in the consumption of animal products is only going to put further pressure on the planet's freshwater supply.

Global animal production requires



Working a local patch that you can walk to – like Hampstead Heath (main photo) for any north London-based readers – can be just as rewarding as the fossil fuel-burning journey to Shetland for an American vagrant such as this Magnolia Warbler (right).



STEVE ARLOW (WWW.BIRDSPRAYGROUND.CO.UK)

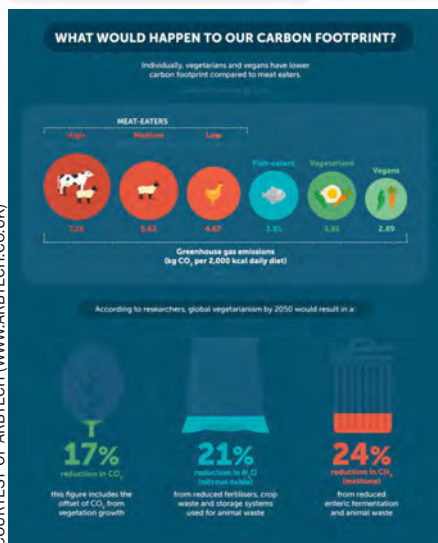
of the best aspects of the vegetarian viewpoint.

Whatever you eat, you should always try to find out where the food comes from, and find ways of mitigating environmental damage. So even though we can buy sweetcorn in December and plums in January, it doesn't mean we should.

Eating seasonal produce will inevitably reduce the food miles that product has travelled, especially if you



YES



COURTESY OF ARBTECH (WWW.ARBTECH.CO.UK)

about 2,422 cubic Gigametres (Gm³) of water per year. Again, cattle are the worst offenders, accounting for one-third of this total. This is because feed accounts for some 98 per cent of an animal's water footprint and beef cattle require the most feed.

But what does that mean for the food on your plate? It takes 112 litres of water to produce 1 g of protein from beef. Pulses, however, require just 19 litres. Switching to a vegetarian diet would clearly hugely reduce pressure on the world's water supply.

To put all those statistics into perspective, the UK alone uses 1.43 billion m³ of Brazilian water though imported soy. Yet 40 million Brazilian families don't have access to a reliable source of clean water.

Vegetarians and vegans have much lower carbon footprints than meat-eaters and swapping to a plant-based diet will reduce greenhouse gasses, as shown in the diagram.

Just reducing global meat consumption would make a huge difference to our environment. I've been vegetarian for almost 30 years and I applaud any attempts to cut down on the amount of meat people eat. There are lots of projects out there. Anyone on Twitter might have noticed the #MeatFreeMondays hashtag, or #Veganuary which challenged people to go vegan for the whole of January. Then there's VB6, encouraging a vegan diet before 6 pm, or weekday vegetarianism, which simply means no meat Monday to Friday.

Of course, such initiatives may not appeal to all, and it's better for everyone contemplating such a major dietary change to do so in a way that works for them. But going meat free on a Monday isn't a huge commitment, and if everyone in the world did the same the amount of meat consumed would fall by a seventh in one easy move. But even better would be full-time vegetarianism. ■

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NO



make a conscious effort to buy food produced in Britain, and better still from your local area.

You can reduce the meat in your diet – meat-free Mondays, or better still two or three meat-free days a week – won't substantially reduce your quality of life, especially if you use it as an opportunity to explore more imaginative vegetarian cooking at the same time.

And whether you are vegetarian or not, it's worth looking at the other ways your lifestyle might be harming the environment, and doing something to reduce the impact of your actions. Travel is one of the biggest issues – so taking public transport or walking or cycling instead of using the car will make a real difference, and might help you get fitter too.

As a birder, maybe you should rethink your priorities. Does seeing 500 species in the UK, or 5,000 in the world, really matter? In 20 years' time, will you really remember that



ALLEN WATKIN (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

The world transport sector is one of the biggest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions; reducing the number of miles you fly is one way of helping to protect the environment.

obscure Central American flycatcher you momentarily glimpsed on a trip to Costa Rica, or whether or not you've actually seen a particular American vagrant in Britain? Driving and flying add considerably to your carbon footprint, so consider alternative ways of enjoying birds.

Local patchwatching really is far more rewarding than twitching; it adds more to our sum of knowledge about our common birds (which may then help save them) and can be just

as exciting as twitching, if not more so. Finding a relatively common species that you've never seen on your patch before sure beats being the 500th person to see some grotty vagrant!

Ultimately, all of these options are your choice – as is whether or not you become a vegetarian. If you do, good luck to you, but if not, don't beat yourself up about it.

Just keep doing what we all want to do – helping to make a better world for birds and the rest of our wildlife. ■

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In Shackleton's footsteps



A trip to South Georgia and Antarctica provided amazing seabirds in the shape of petrels, penguins, albatrosses, skuas and more for **Rod Standing**. But it was the ubiquitous Cape Petrel – a reminder of Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated journey – that really stood out.

Brown Skuas and Southern Giant Petrels swoop in to rip the mother seal's placenta to pieces, gobbling it down. The pup lies oblivious, born just a few minutes earlier on the beach in front of us. Bull Elephant Seals – each weighing four tons – charge each other, scattering King Penguins like ninepins. Groups of brown, fluffy penguin chicks look bemused, and some run up to us, flapping their flippers and cheeping lustily, perhaps hoping we are their parents. Above, Snow Petrels patrol the cliff-tops, serenely surveying this frenzied start to the sub-Antarctic breeding season.

We are at Gold Harbour on the coast of South Georgia, a short zodiac ride from our ship the *Akademik Sergey Vavilov*, a comfortable ice-strengthened polar research vessel chartered for

tourists by One Ocean Expeditions. The *Vavilov* has brought us here from Tierra del Fuego via the Falkland Islands, in the company of many species of albatross and petrel, especially Cape Petrels which have outnumbered every other bird. They are called '*Pintados*' in Spanish, meaning 'painted', a reference to their smart black-and-white plumage.

Antarctic pigeons

The same 'Cape Pigeons' (as he called them) accompanied Ernest Shackleton as he set sail from South Georgia for the Antarctic 100 years ago, planning to complete the first crossing of the continent. His ship – the optimistically named *Endurance* – was crushed in the pack ice, leaving Shackleton and his 27 men marooned on an ice floe with just three small lifeboats as their only means

of getting back. During their slow and freezing return journey he and his men endured months of extreme hardship, surviving on whatever they could catch, including seals, penguins and even albatross chicks.

I reflect on this as we stand atop nearby Prion Island. A Wandering Albatross lands just a few metres away, its three-metre wingspan dwarfing every other bird, to feed its downy chick. The adult opens its beak and the chick gratefully catches the regurgitated fishy mess in its own. "We did not enjoy attacking these birds," Shackleton admitted, "but our hunger knew no law."

The smallest bird here is even more remarkable than the largest. South Georgia Pipit, a ground-nesting species, is the world's southernmost passerine. Even though it can survive in this harsh



Huge colonies of Adelie Penguins amid the snow and ice are a spectacular sight. The species can only be found on the coasts of Antarctica.



ROD STANDING

Left: referred to as Cape Pigeon by Ernest Shackleton, Cape Petrels were a constant companion on the trip.

Below: the beautiful Snow Petrel was one of seven petrel species logged during the voyage. It has the most southerly breeding distribution of any bird.



environment, it has for decades been losing a battle with introduced rats, threatening its very survival. The South Georgia Heritage Trust has embarked on the world's largest rat-eradication programme – no mean feat in this remote mountainous landscape – and has now treated the entire western half of the island group with rat poison.

At Salisbury Plain, a site on the north-west coast, we are thrilled to be first to see the soaring song flight of a pipit after decades of absence. The programme continues, and if successful

should enable not just many more pipits but up to 100 million seabirds to return to South Georgia.

We get an inkling of what this might mean at rat-free Cooper Island, just off the southern tip of South Georgia. We are unable to leave the ship due to high winds, but as we sail past, hundreds



ROD STANDING

REBECCA COLE

Above: Brown Skua, here with a Gentoo Penguin for company, occurs in three distinct forms in its limited Southern Ocean distribution.

Left: the world's most southerly passerine, South Georgia Pipit is threatened by rats introduced to the islands by humans. A rat-eradication programme is under way and numbers are recovering.

The largest of the albatrosses, with the greatest wingspan of any living bird, Wandering Albatross is classified as Vulnerable. The biggest threat to its survival is longline fishing, although pollution is also taking a toll.



ROD STANDING



When they are old enough, King Penguins will leave their chicks in a crèche with other juveniles so the parents can look for food.

of Cape and White-chinned Petrels are sitting on the surface of the sea and thousands of Blue Petrels and Antarctic Prions fly close by.

We turn south towards a vast tabular iceberg on the horizon, and hundreds of Common Diving Petrels – tiny birds like Little Auks – buzz along on whirring wings next to the ship. Shackleton wrote: “Then there was a small bird, unfamiliar to me, which appeared always to be in a fussy, bustling state, quite out of keeping with

Cooper Island is one of just a few rat-free islands in the South Georgia group. It is home to huge numbers of petrels, as well as the declining South Georgia Pipit.



ROD STANDING



ROD STANDING



ALAN TATE

Above: with its breeding range confined to Campbell and Auckland Islands, New Zealand, Southern Royal Albatross is classified as Vulnerable. It was one of five albatross species recorded.

Left: Antarctic Prion can be seen in its thousands on Cooper Island.



the surroundings. It irritated me." His crew said that the only time he swore on the whole journey was when one of these little birds appeared.

Was it a diving petrel that incurred his wrath?

"Whale! 12.30; three spouts!" The dark grey backs of three enormous Fin Whales slide above the surface, showing their surprisingly small dorsal fins, and disappear again. We are now sailing south-west across the Scotia Sea towards the Antarctic Peninsula, scanning forwards from the bridge. The *Vavilov's* captain tells us that the whales are recovering well from the days of whaling in this area, and we see more than 30 on this leg of the trip alone.

Peerless penguins

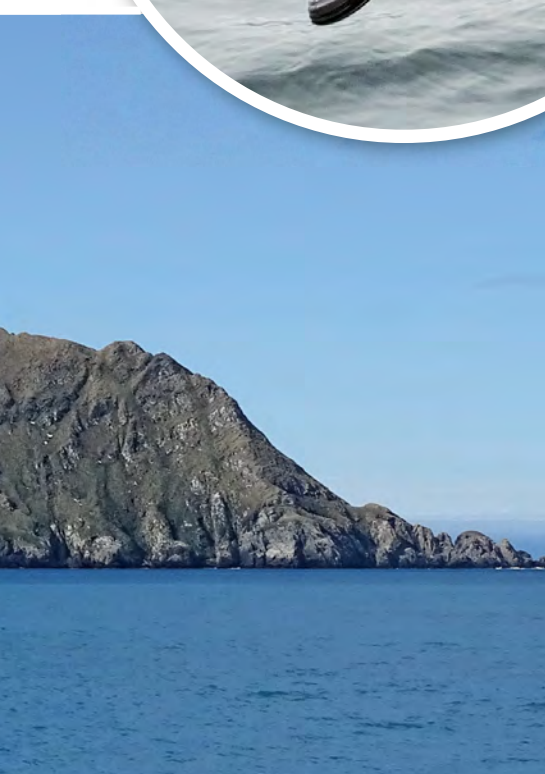
I knew we would see penguins, but nothing prepared me for the child-like wonder a large colony inspires. At Brown Bluff on the Antarctic mainland, the snow gleams in the bright sun as we stand surrounded by thousands of Adelie Penguins and a handful of red-beaked Gentoos. The Adelies seem almost comically serious in their

white spectacles as they bustle about bringing little black stones from beach to nest. One takes the quick way down, tobogganing past us until he bumps into another coming up the hill and makes off with a stone which has fallen to the snow in the confusion.

Out in the bay, a chocolate-and-white Antarctic Petrel circles the ship before heading inland to nest, far beyond our reach. These are among the most mysterious of all Antarctic birds and most of their colonies are so remote as to be still unknown.

Even further south, we take to zodiacs to cruise among the icebergs crowding the entrance to the Graham Passage. Many of the bergs are an astonishing shade of deep blue that seems to shine from within. The driver nudges the zodiac into the brash ice and cuts the engine. We drift in the gentle swell, listening to the ice crackle quietly around us. It is a moment of sublime peace. Down here the birds are few and far between, but three Snow Petrels fly close around us and a Wilson's Storm-petrel hurries past.

The Drake Passage is the infamous sting in the tail of our voyage. Heading back north across it for Tierra del Fuego, we are buffeted by strong westerly winds and waves that cause the *Vavilov* to roll. We grip the table tightly while eating breakfast, but we are soon allowed back on deck. The Cape Petrels have returned to accompany us, making light of the fierce winds. Light-mantled Albatrosses also follow us at the stern and one has an all-dark back – a Sooty



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

Albatross, a rarity this far south.

The swells abate as we pass Cape Horn and the sea becomes smooth as we approach our destination. Two Southern Rockhopper Penguins resting on the surface are a real bonus – our seventh penguin species. The ship comes to a halt perhaps 10 miles off the coast, and we wait to rendezvous with the pilot in the Beagle Channel. As we drift in the evening light, the Cape Petrels that have been following us are joined by thousands of others and they settle on the glassy sea. Dozens of Black-browed and Southern Royal Albatrosses arrive too. A constant stream of Sooty Shearwaters flies among them towards their burrows on land and Wilson's Storm-petrels flit back and forth.

As I watch the Cape Petrels diving for food scraps beneath the ship's bows and bobbing to the surface like corks, I think again of Shackleton. He wrote: "We were not disposed to destroy our little neighbours the Cape Pigeons, even for the sake of fresh meat ... these little black-and-white birds have an air of friendliness." We have been privileged to sail the same seas, even walk on the same ground, as the great explorer, but it has been the abundant birds of the Southern Ocean, and especially our mutual friends the Cape Petrels, that have given me the greatest connection with Shackleton's Antarctic. I hope they will still be here in another 100 years' time. ■



ROD STANDING

SOUTH GEORGIA AND ANTARCTICA

Visiting

- South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands tourist information: email contact@sgisland.org; web www.sgisland.gs.
- For more information on the cruise contact One Ocean Expeditions: tel 001 351 962 721 836; email voyages@oneoceanexpeditions.com; web www.oneoceanexpeditions.com.
- The South Georgia Heritage Trust: www.sght.org.

Further reading

- *A Field Guide to the Wildlife of South Georgia* by Robert Burton and John Croxall (WILDGuides, £17.95) – order from £15.95 on page 77.

- *Birds of Southern South America and Antarctica* by Martín R de la Peña and Maurice Rumboll (Collins, 1998, £25).
- *A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife* by Hadoram Shirihai (A&C Black, 2007, £40) – order from £34.99 on page 77.

Online resources

- A checklist of the birds recorded in South Georgia: www.neseabirds.com/Antarctica/ant996.htm.
- For a full downloadable checklist of all the world's birds, including Antarctica, visit: www.worldbirdnames.org.

ROD STANDING



Top: classified as Vulnerable due to declining numbers, White-chinned Petrel is another species taking advantage of rat-free Cooper Island.

Left: as the name implies, Southern Giant Petrel is the largest member of its family, the Procellariidae, along with its sister species, Northern Giant Petrel.

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SOUTH

Noah's big year



Is seeing 5,000 birds in a single year possible? American birder Noah Strycker thinks so. He set out at the beginning of this year to beat the current record. **Chantal Cooke** caught up with him in the Antarctic.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NOAH STRYCKER

4,341 species of birds – that's the current world record for a 'big year', held by British couple Ruth Miller and Alan Davies. But that could soon be smashed by young American birder Noah Strycker. The 28-year-old from Oregon has set himself the goal of seeing 5,000 birds during 2015.

He started his big year in the Antarctic as the bird expert aboard a One Ocean Expeditions trip to the southernmost continent. It was clear very soon after meeting him that what Noah doesn't know about birds probably isn't worth knowing. Throw any question at him and he seemed to know the answer; he got a lot of 'interesting' queries from the passengers on board, including the one he says he gets asked every trip: "Are penguins birds?" That actually seemed quite reasonable after fellow on-board naturalist Steve Bailey was asked "How long do whales spend on land with their young after giving birth?"

Record-breaking attempt

Noah had been thinking about attempting to break the big year record for some time, but until recently it was just that – a vague dream with no real substance. However, earlier in 2014 he decided to see if he could make it a reality. Author of two books on birds already (*The Thing with Feathers* and

Among Penguins), Noah pitched the idea to his agent, who in turn suggested it to Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing.

"HMH gave me the book the green light, and paid me a modest advance on royalties, and just like that the trip suddenly became a reality. I now had to do it. That was in August. Before that I didn't really believe it would happen," explains Noah. "Nobody has ever tried a single, year-long, round-the-world birding trip. I want to take a big-picture approach; instead of going home periodically to do laundry, I'll just keep birding, across one border after another, for 365 straight days."

Rather than hiring international tour guides, Noah will spend his time with passionate locals – individuals who care about their home patches, and who are making a difference for birds in their own areas. Along the way, he plans to explore how birding, and the conservation of birds, fits into our crowded, globalised world.

Noah managed to secure a contract from the National Audubon Society to blog about

Noah holds an Adelie Penguin chick during a three-month research project at the penguin colony at Cape Crozier, Antarctica, which numbers several hundred thousand individuals.

his trip and Leica provided a 10x42 Ultravid HD-Plus binocular; a 65 mm TeleviD spotting scope with tripod, and a V-Lux camera.

Picking up penguins

As Noah was already booked for the Antarctic trip, it seemed fitting to start his quest at the bottom of the world. It may not be the best place – after all there aren't huge numbers of bird species there – but many are endemic and it does have some of Noah's favourite



CHANTAL COOKE



A highlight of birding in Chile was finding this enigmatic Diademed Sandpiper-Plover in the Central Andes.

birds: penguins. “I’ve been in love with them ever since 2009, when I joined a three-month research project studying Adelie Penguins on Cape Crozier. For me, staring at penguins for eight hours a day, seven days a week, was life changing. Penguins have big personalities and little fear of humans, so it’s easy to appreciate their antics at close range.”

Noah needs to average 14 new species a day, every day, for 365 days in order to reach his target of 5,000. Why 5,000?

“There are approximately 10,000 bird species, so aiming to see half of them seemed like a good number. It feels as though it’s probably achievable, and it passes the current record. You could say it’s a bit arbitrary – but it seemed to make sense.”

The first bird of the big year was Cape Petrel – spotted around 3 am on 1 January from the bow of the ship. “I always think that the first bird is like your horoscope for the year. So for me this is a Cape Petrel year – which I’m sure means it will be a great 12 months. How could it not be? I’ll be spending it birding!”

Bleaker Island in the Falklands gave Noah his first lifer, a Two-Banded Plover, and brought his total to just 53 species in the first seven days.

“Antarctica has awesome birds, but not many

species. But as soon as I arrived in South America, things went into overdrive. I’m now averaging more than 14 new species per day – right on target for breaking the world record.”

Noah’s first stop after leaving the Antarctic ship was Tierra del Fuego National Park, a few miles outside Ushuaia, Argentina. He spent just a few hours there, adding 37 new species, before flying to Santiago in Chile. He will be spending three and a half months in South America before heading north and then later on to Europe, Africa, Asia and finally Australia.

Packing light

How did Noah prepare for this trip? After all, even as a keen birder, this is a bit of an endurance test, both physically and mentally.

“First, I strategised: to maximise bird species, I decided to make this a once-round-the-world trip, rather than out-and-back from home – it’s more efficient that way. I tried to think about birding habitats and environments, rather than focusing on one bird at a time. It soon became clear that, with so much travelling, I wouldn’t be able to check any luggage, so I bought a pack small enough to carry onto any plane, and didn’t pack anything that wouldn’t fit.

“Mentally, this trip is quite a journey; it actually has more in common with hiking the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail (which I did in 2011) than anything else I’ve ever done. That hiking trip, in many ways, helped prepare me for this adventure. I’ll be visiting more than 35 countries on seven continents, flying on about 70 out of the next 365 days. There will be no days off! I know I’ll be responsible for burning a lot of fuel in 2015, so I have joined a carbon offset programme. It’s not perfect, but in theory my net carbon footprint during this trip will be zero.

“So far, it’s going great! I’m ahead of my 14-new-bird-species-a-day pace, and I’m confident, at the moment, that I can keep it up. To date everything has more or less run according to plan, although there have been a few slight hiccups – delayed flights, no-show meet-ups, and so on, but nothing terminal. Logistically, things will go wrong – that’s expected on any itinerary this complicated – and I’ll just have to roll with it. But a delayed flight in the wrong place could cost dozens of birds.”

For Noah, however, this journey is about much more than just the number of species and beating the world record. “Success will be measured not by how many birds I see but what adventures I have along the way.”

There is no doubt 2015 will be an exciting year for Noah, even in the unlikely event that he fails to beat the record. So what next – can he top this adventure? “I’m not sure what my next project will be yet, and I’m not worried about it – this one will take two years (one to travel, another to write the book) and that’s long enough for me!” ■

You can follow Noah’s journey at www.noahstrycker.com and www.audubon.org/noah.

Right: Noah spent several productive days birding in Chile, including at this location seeking Mountain Caracaras at almost 3,000 m in the Andes east of Santiago.

Left: Chinstrap Penguins at the nest fight off an opportunistic skua at Half Moon Island, South Shetlands, Antarctica.



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8x42	RRP	£139.95	£125.99

Hawke
SPORT OPTICS
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opticon
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10x32 BGA MG	RRP	£299	£239

opticon
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Folding Roof Prism Binoculars

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Bushnell
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8x42 - Green	RRP	£195	£149
10x42 - Green	RRP	£210	£159

Bushnell
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Roof Prism Binoculars

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Bushnell
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With BW Text LCD

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SWAROVSKI OPTIK
SCOPE ACCESSORIES

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Scope Travel 200 AW - Backpack
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Country Traveller GTX	RRP	£145	£99
Country Strider GTX	RRP	£130	£89
Countrymaster II GTX	RRP	£130	£89

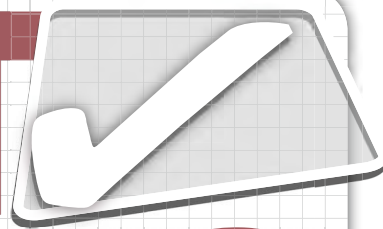
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EXPERT REVIEWS



Your trusted guide to what's new in birding: bit.ly/birdwatchreviews



At the sharp end

Previously impressed with the compact telescope of the same name, **Mike Alibone's** high expectations were fully met by Vortex's latest flagship binocular, the Razor.

REVIEW

Vortex Razor 8x42 HD binocular

RAZOR: an apt name for a range of optics in which image sharpness is striking from the first moment you look through them. Superseding the previous 2011 model, the American brand intent on raising its profile in Britain has produced a top-quality birding binocular that challenges the established elite.

The Razor range comprises four models which, along with the 8x42 tested here, include 10x42, 10x50 and 12x50 binoculars. Made in Japan, the latest models are significantly different from those they have replaced, the principal external differences lying in a return to a single-hinge design and the 8x42 measuring more than 12 mm shorter. The design change, combined with a new magnesium chassis, has resulted in the model weighing in at 120 g lighter than its predecessor.

There are major internal differences, too, specifically in the use of an APO optical system, combined with premium HD glass and Vortex's proprietary 'XRPlus' multi-coatings. To quote Vortex: "Premium proprietary coatings deliver the highest level of light transmission with multiple anti-reflective coatings on all air-to-glass surfaces for maximum brightness." The new Razor HD also features dielectric

prism coatings and uses 'Plasma Tech', which is described as a "cutting-edge application process providing unparalleled coating durability and performance".

So how does all this translate to performance in the field? With the centre of gravity across the hinge I found it well balanced

and comfortable to hold. Shallow cutaways direct your thumbs along the barrels so the strap lugs do not press uncomfortably into the space between your thumbs and forefingers. Weighing 686 g, this model is lighter than the top-tier competition.

Although covered with a thin

layer of very hard, textured rubber, the surface appears to provide little grip compared to some binoculars which have a softer rubber armouring. This is, however, a minor point and there is still a well-constructed, quality feel to the body.

The eyecups twist out and click-stop in three positions above the base setting. They are rigid, exude durability and are of a design that includes a soft rubber



72 March's photo challenge

The delightful Goldfinch is the subject this month – Steve Young wants to see your best photos.

73 What a waist

This multi-pocket waistcoat means you can easily carry everything you need for a day out in the field.

73 Discover the natural world

Toca Nature is a new app aimed at getting children interested in nature, but does it work?

74 Strange behaviour

An intriguing look at surprising bird behaviour from across the avian world.

74 What's in a name?

A new book recounts the tales behind bird species' scientific and English names.

75 Eider down

The latest Poyser monograph recounts the fascinating cultural history of Common Eider.

THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



MIKE ALIBONE is *Birdwatch*'s Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than a decade.



DAVID CALLAHAN Prior to joining *Birdwatch*, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



STEVE YOUNG is Photographic Consultant for *Birdwatch* and an award-winning wildlife photographer.



ROB HUME began watching birds as a child. He worked for the RSPB for many years and has written several books.



TIM APPLETON is well known as co-founder of Birdfair. He was awarded an MBE in 2004 in recognition of his conservation work.



DOMINIC MITCHELL is *Birdwatch*'s founder and Managing Editor. He has been birding in Britain and abroad for more than 40 years.

Did you know?

APO is an abbreviation for apochromatic, or apochromatically corrected. An APO optical system normally comprises three lens elements – sometimes two, if lower-density glass is used – designed for the purpose of significantly reducing chromatic aberration (colour fringing) within the image.

section at the point where they come into contact with the eyes, making the viewing experience more comfortable.

Single-eye focus adjustment is achieved by pulling up and turning a rigidly milled ring located on the right ocular. This dioptre is lockable by pushing it down after the desired setting has been achieved, but it does mean that the eyecup above it must be twisted out to the first extended position before the dioptre can be operated. There is a +/- incremental scale against which to record the setting.

Just over 1.5 anti-clockwise rotations of the main focusing wheel takes the image from close focus to infinity. Covered with a layer of soft, finely milled rubber, it turns exceptionally smoothly, provides the perfect degree of turning resistance and operates well with gloved fingers. The close-focus distance quoted by Vortex is 1.83 m, but I still got a sharply focused image down to approximately 1.65 m – a big plus for anyone who also wants to watch insects.

The image remains sharp at all focusing distances. It's impressively crisp across the whole field, right to the very edge, with no softness or deterioration. Arguably this is at the expense of field of view, but in this respect it's only a fraction behind its nearest top-tier competitor.

There is a hairline yellow fringe

at the field edge, which is barely detectable during normal viewing, and the whole image appears colour neutral, the binocular returning rich, natural subject colours with only a modicum of chromatic aberration.

I used the Razor HD on a recent trip to Scotland, where it enhanced the enjoyment of watching Aberdeen's celebrity Harlequin Duck, along with a Dipper feeding in the bright sparkling rapids of the River Don. The often subtle differences in colour between different dark feather tracts in the plumage of both species were highlighted well by the image contrast provided by this binocular. This feature was also evident while watching birds in deep shadow or in conditions of low light intensity, helped no doubt by the high light transmission

Further info

- **Price:** £1,119
- **Size:** 150x130 mm
- **Weight:** 686 g
- **Field of view:** 129 m at 1,000 m
- **Light transmission:** 94 per cent
- **Close focus:** 1.83 m
- **Gas-filled:** yes
- **Waterproof:** yes
- **Guarantee:** unlimited lifetime

Verdict

- ✓ Image remains sharp at all focusing distances
- ✓ Colours are natural with only a modicum of chromatic aberration
- ✗ Rubber armour appears to give little grip

factor of 94 per cent, which puts this model on a par with binoculars from the acknowledged top-tier manufacturers.

I cannot really fault this binocular. In terms of price it is not inexpensive, but in terms of 'performance per pound' it represents a tremendously good alternative to the much more highly priced top-drawer models available in the current market.

Standard accompanying accessories include rainguard, stay-on objective covers – which neither fall off nor get in the way of the lenses during use – a soft carry case and a comfortable padded lanyard.

If you're considering investing in a new, high-quality binocular which offers true value for money, it could be time to give Vortex a whirl. ■

OPTICS EVENT

Chew Valley Bird Fair 2015



THE annual Chew Valley Bird Fair will again take place on the lawns outside London Camera Exchange's Lakeside Optics shop at Chew Magna, south of Bristol. The event offers visitors the chance to view and buy a range of optical and camera equipment and get expert advice, while testing the products against a spectacular backdrop. There will also be the opportunity to trade in old equipment in part exchange.

A range of manufacturers will be represented, including Vortex, Swarovski, Zeiss, Canon and Leica.

There will be a series of talks and workshops during the weekend; further details of these will be available on the website closer to the event.

When: 24-25 April. **Where:** Lakeside Optics, Chew Magna BS40 8TF. **Further information:** call 01275 332042 or visit www.lakesideoptics.co.uk. ■

STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE



Above: during autumn, when this image was taken, seeds are plentiful and teasels, dandelions and grasses all provide feeding, but late winter is a time when Goldfinch numbers increase at feeding stations.

Right: Goldfinches will often search on the ground for grass seed, so try for some low-level close-ups; if approached with care, individual birds can be very tame.

Goldfinch

THE last two photo challenges have been very well received, so to keep up the momentum I'm going to choose one of our most popular and attractive garden visitors for this month: Goldfinch.

If you put out seed for your garden birds or visit a feeding station regularly, this will be a nice easy challenge. Once Goldfinches have found a food supply they seem to keep coming back and bring lots of others with them. The birds may look very attractive and gentle, but once on a feeder an individual can be aggressive towards other species trying to get to the food, as well as to other Goldfinches who might try to take its perch.

Late winter into early spring is one of the best times to see good numbers of Goldfinches as natural food is at a low level. My feeding station always has the highest counts from mid-February to end of March.

Although Goldfinches on feeders are fun to watch, they don't always make the best photos, so try setting up some perches nearby for the birds to land on before they move to the food.

With such a common subject my hopes are high for something really good this month. I'm looking forward to seeing all your entries. Good luck!

Email your best candidates to editorial@birdwatch.co.uk. The winning photographer will receive a copy of *RSPB Migration Hotspots* by Tim Harris.

• Turn to page 93 to find out who won January's winter challenge.



Pocket organiser

REVIEW

Raptor waistcoat

OUTDOOR multi-pocket waistcoats can be an acquired taste, with some appreciating the extra layer of clothing and many-purpose pockets, but others not looking beyond their basic functionality.

There's no denying the practicality such garments. Country Innovation's military-grade Raptor waistcoat (launched at last year's Birdfair) has 15 pockets for all your needs: two chest pockets with two pen slots, which are also counted as pockets (in my experience with a previous waistcoat, body heat or direct sunlight can result in an unfortunate ink stain that technology hasn't come to terms with yet); two larger, press-stud-sealed chest pockets (large enough to take the *Collins Bird Guide*); large external and internal rear pockets; three inner pockets, which are appropriate for gloves, mobile phone, notebooks and even lenses in the larger,

elasticated lower two, which also have internal security pockets enclosed; and two ordinary hand-warming pockets. The military theme is accentuated by the shoulder epaulettes, and there is a small amount of padding there, too, making the carrying of bags a bit less chafing, as does a thick, shirt-style collar.

The waistcoat is made of a warm, durable and hard-wearing 'Rip-tec' fabric, and has a chunky two-way zip which robustly resists breakage. It can be adjusted to suit your figure with side straps, and there is also a pleated rear for extra comfort. Usefully, the garment is machine washable and can be tumble dried and ironed. A stormproofing chemical is available for an extra £6, but this wasn't included with the test.

I completely ruined a previous waistcoat on a seven-week trip to Madagascar some years ago, but this new model would

probably better withstand the pressure of sweating, climbing, carrying optics and weight all day, and even sleeping in it at times. I found it comfortable and accommodating in the field, and very useful for carrying everything I needed, particularly as I usually bird on foot or by bike. It kept me warm on a frosty morning, but was not too sweltering when the winter sun came out later. When fully loaded, the waistcoat held the extra weight well. Overall, this is a well-made workhorse of a garment, and while

neither essential nor cheap, will see you through many a birding trip over the years. **David Callahan**



More info

From Country Innovation • £125 • Sizes: S, M, L and XL • Colours: green • www.countryinnovation.com

Building nature

REVIEW

Toca Nature app

IF you have school-age children, you will be more than aware of the obsessions that can develop over computer games such as Minecraft. Parental fears are normally allayed by becoming more familiar with the game, when the sheer amount of creativity that can be involved in playing it becomes apparent.

Toca Nature is a similar 'exploratory' app to the Minecraft Pocket Edition. It is based on the same Lego-style mode of building, but in this case it revolves around a somewhat idealised, cartoonish version of the natural world. The pastel-toned, almost watercolour graphics are easy on the eye, and (as in Minecraft) it is possible to zoom in from viewing the whole 'world' to macro-level, right down to the virtual soil.

The main purpose of the app is educational: it is a simplistic means to encourage children to think about how organisms interact with each other and their habitats. In this it succeeds, and children can create places to grow fungi

and plants, create wetlands and grasslands and install mammals and fish in those environments. Clicking different trees can produce large mammals such as bears and wolves, and the habitats go right from mountain tops to the sea. There are plenty of problem-solving opportunities along the way, and a slew of different landscapes to choose from – the same starting point always leads in new directions.

It is a constructive game. It is not possible to 'win' or score points, and you can 'work' at your own pace and start from scratch if it doesn't turn out how you envisaged. Part of the allure of the game is the clever detail, and numerous berries, nuts, insects and fossils can be found when zooming in.

Toca Nature is a cheap, flat-fee app, and there aren't many mods or add-ons as yet. It takes plenty of time to explore, and children can spend many an hour playing with its seemingly endless features. Whether



it will replace my own kids' fascination with more well-known mainstream games is another matter, especially as such games

are already well established with their peers, but it is an affordable alternative to creatively while away the hours. **David Callahan**

More info

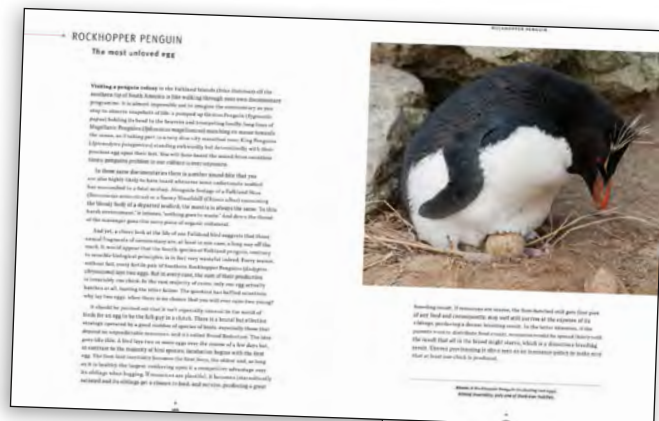
From Toca Boca AB • £2.49 • 72.2 MB • Requires iOS 5.0 or later • Version 1.0.1 • bit.ly/bw273BocaNature

Bird behaviour made accessible



DOMINIC Couzens certainly knows what he's writing about and can be relied on to produce authoritative books on fascinating bird-related subjects, written in a way that we can all understand. And, fortunately, written in a way that generally makes us want to read on.

This latest example of his work is a neat, glossy, well-produced book that takes a selection of bird species from each continent as a sort of primer on aspects of bird behaviour. Dominic helpfully lists the kind of thing he covers and the species he uses to illustrate the theme: incubation



(Rockhopper Penguin), pair bonds (fairywrens and Great Grey Shrike), nest-robbing (toucans), memory (Black-capped Chickadee) and so on. It is a sort of 'life of birds' sampler.

Forty short chapters take us through a host of up-to-date, well-researched facts and theories and informed speculations about birds, reminding us how amazing and endlessly fascinating they are, and provoking further thought in the questioning and imaginative reader.

The book is copiously illustrated, although some of the

photographs are a bit clinical for my own taste, and the design, clear and bright as it is, perhaps has a slightly dated look somehow. If you want to know

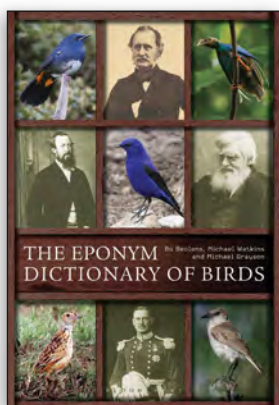
more about how bird behaviour has evolved and is still evolving, and like subjects drawn from birdlife worldwide, this is the book for you. **Rob Hume**

More info

- *Tales of Remarkable Birds* by Dominic Couzens (Bloomsbury, London, 2015).
- 224 pages, 120 colour photographs.
- ISBN 9781408190234. Hbk, £20.

Birdwatch Bookshop
from
£17.99

Debrett's for birds



MANY birders will be familiar with *Whose Bird?*, the good-humoured stocking-filler that detailed the ornithologists and taxonomists from which many birds derived their common names. That book entertained but left many of the tales untold, particularly the many more researchers and others commemorated in birds' scientific names.

This doorstep of a tome redresses that balance, and then some. It's literally a *Who's*

Who of ornithologists, zoologists, financiers, philanthropists, spouses, explorers, royalty and teachers, among others, all of whom have the singular credit of being preserved for posterity in the English or scientific name of a bird species or subspecies.

Many of the names will be familiar to regular users of field guides. It is still eye opening, however, to see the actual number of birds named after the likes of Allan Octavian Hume, for example, who seemed to have cornered the eponym market in India during the colonial period.

They're all here: revolutionaries like Darwin, Wallace, Gould and Audubon, explorer-pioneers like Humboldt, Steller, Pallas and Seeborn, local experts like Naumann, Schlegel and Kirtland, and museum-bound researchers like MacGillivray, Jouanin and Henslow.

Hidden among these names are some of the greatest and bravest explorers and scientists of the colonial age, which is

when most bird species were first documented in the west. Some selections, however, seem to stretch the remit a little, like mythical Biblical giant Goliath or Hindu god Brahma.

This is a relatively unadorned list of the relevant people's names, the birds named after that person, and a very brief summary of their achievements. It purports to be no more than this, and as such serves as an excellent reference from which to do further research. However, I could have used some photos and paintings of the characters involved, even if in black and white, and a little more biographical colour. More information on how a bird came by its name would have also hooked me in further – we learn

that Professor Doctor Mariano de la Paz Graells y de la Aguera (1809-1898) gave his name to the British subspecies of Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus graellsii*, but not how or why.

There are plenty of interesting snippets to glean. I always thought that Magnolia Warbler was named after the colour or the tree, but apparently its forename is adapted from Pierre Magnol, a French doctor, who did actually give his name to the tree genus; even in the short paragraphs allowed for each entry, this kind of detail emerges.

This is a book to refer to or dip in to from time to time, rather than read in depth, but it will reward the curious with plenty of avenues to follow elsewhere.

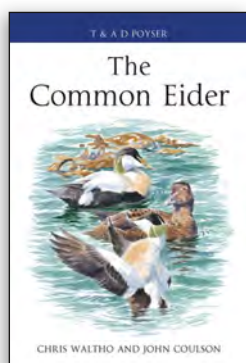
David Callahan

More info

- *The Eponym Dictionary of Birds* by Bo Beolens, Michael Watkins and Michael Grayson (Bloomsbury, London, 2014).
- 624 pages.
- ISBN 9781472905734. Hbk, £50.

Birdwatch Bookshop
from
£44

The definitive duvet duck



WE have come to expect a very high standard from T & A D Poyser's monographs, and I am delighted to say that once again the authors of *The Common Eider* have surpassed themselves and produced a book of exceptional quality. Chris Waltho has been studying eiders for more than 40 years in the Clyde area of Scotland, while John Coulson began his studies on Coquet Island as long ago as 1958.

Due to the amazing insulation properties of the bird's down, the name eider, or at least eiderdown, is familiar to a global audience, although in recent years the French word for eider, duvet, has become even more familiar.

The bulk of the literature covers in minute detail every aspect of the species' distribution, feeding, breeding, incubation, survival and mortality.

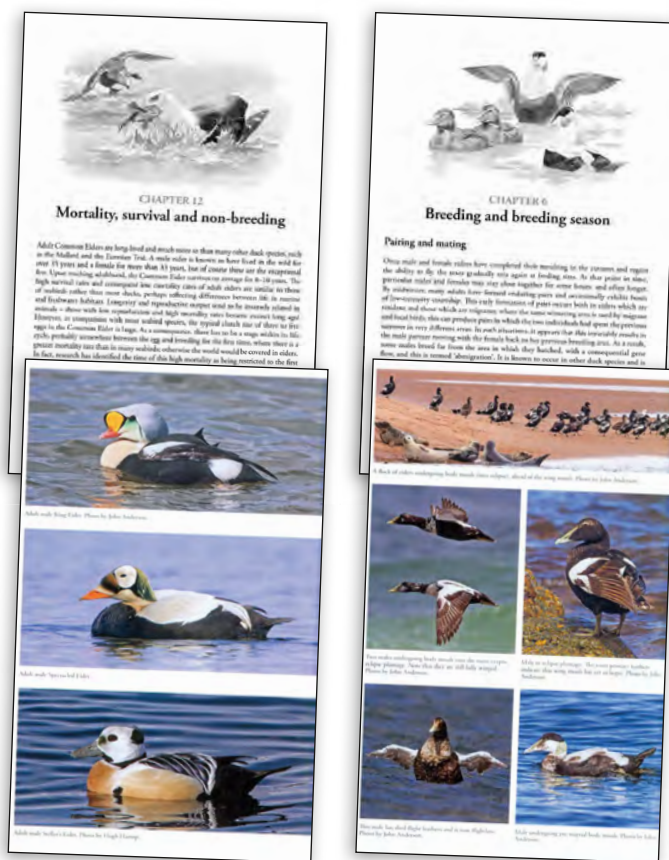
The book is exceptionally well researched, with the authors drawing on their own in-depth studies as well as the 621 references listed.

As a self-confessed duck enthusiast, I enjoyed delving into this remarkable monograph which successfully combines both science and a good read in its 352 pages. This book is the first English-language monograph of this species, which is surprising considering it is one of the most studied of all the world's waterfowl.

I particularly enjoyed the chapters on exploitation, management and conservation. It was heartening to learn that despite hundreds of years of human exploitation, the species' population remains stable and there are only minor conservation concerns.

The final chapter introduces a third author, Dr Diana Solovyeva, who is one of only a handful of scientists who have studied all four species of eider: King, Spectacled, Steller's and Common. She gives a brief but highly informative account of the first three species, arranged in the same order as the previous chapters on Common Eider.

The authors are to be congratulated and I recommend adding this tome to your bulging book shelves. **Tim Appleton**

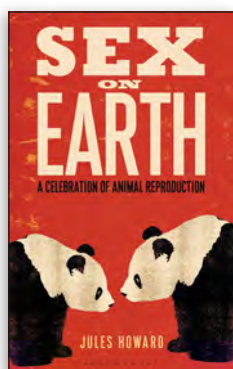


More info

- *The Common Eider* by Chris Waltho and John Coulson (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2015).
- 352 pages, 10 plates with colour photos and distribution maps, black-and-white illustrations, black-and-white maps, tables.
- ISBN 9781408125328. Hbk, £50.

Birdwatch Bookshop
from
£39.99

Less sex please, we're British



ERIC Morecambe looked through a window, turned to Ernie Wise and said: "Dogs don't care, do they?" Which is a little funnier than some of the humour in this book.

Chapter headings – the author's or the publisher's? – such as The Cloaca Monologues, Land of the Sexless Zombie Time-

travellers and The Insurmountable Hump aren't that funny, really. The problem is that unless they really are funny – and there are plenty of good jokes about sex, after all – they sort of lose the point. As the author might say they are, well, a little limp.

The book is full of humping, pumping, thrusting and tabloid-style capitalised words such as ANUS, RECTUM and ERECTION – it's all having it, doing it and masturbating with watermelons. I once knew someone a bit obsessed with poo – animal poo, bird poo, children's poo. Enough, thanks. I'm more a droppings man myself. This book is a bit like that.

Books should cover interesting subjects in a reader-friendly, engaging style. This one is undoubtedly full of fascinating

stuff, fundamentally important aspects of animal life, our own included. But, for me, the style detracts from the substance. Examples include "Don't get me wrong, I love imagining dinosaurian sex parts just as much as the next man" or "The Joy of T-Rex" reads the Mail Online headline. 'Scientists show how dinosaurs had sex' and I'm hooked. I must read more", or even "They, like me, are likely to be transfixed by the pornographic collection of computer-rendered illustrations showing dinosaurs doing it." Well, I suppose. There

are more than enough penis stories, the author tells us; what the world needs is more vagina stories.

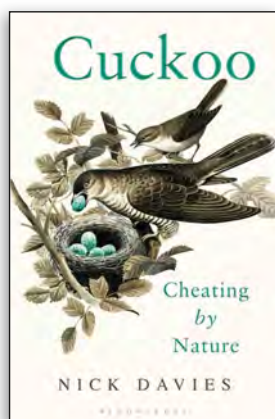
The book is full of thought-provoking information on whatever you like to call it – breeding biology, sexual behaviour, sexual selection, evolution or having it away – but I'm not sure it's my book of choice. It might well be yours, and I recommend it if you want to learn more. You will certainly find much out – whether you enjoy it quite as much as the publishers hope, I don't quite know. **Rob Hume**

More info

- *Sex on Earth: a Celebration of Animal Reproduction* by Jules Howard (Bloomsbury, London, 2014).
- 272 pages.
- ISBN 9781408193419. Hbk, £16.99.

Birdwatch Bookshop
from
£14.99

Cuckoo detective story



AS spring approaches and one's ears become attuned to hearing the first Common Cuckoo of the year, this book is published – well-timed to fill the gaps in your knowledge about this charismatic and complex species.

With lively, 'jizzy' line drawings from Norfolk artist James McCallum which capture the 'vibe' of the field, the author takes us on a lively stroll through the life history, behaviour and folklore of this obligate brood parasite.

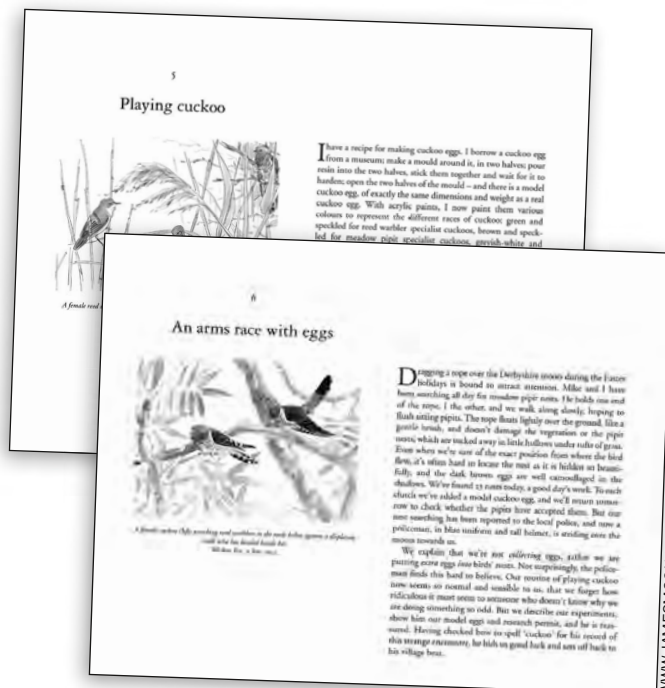
Beginning with some generalities about the cuckoo family and early observations of the species' behaviour, Nick Davies draws on the familiar writings of Gilbert White and Charles Darwin, as well as the genetic research of modern workers, to elucidate how cuckoos get round their host's

defences and fool the surrogate parents into raising their giant incubus of a chick.

Constantly he returns to his own observations of cuckoos hosted by Reed Warblers at Wicken Fen, Cambridgeshire, giving the book a personal and local feel throughout. This contrasts pleasingly with the science and history interwoven in each chapter. The author is often reminding or informing us of lost pieces of birding culture, such as Edgar Chance's 1921 movie *The Cuckoo's Secret*, the first time the egg-laying of Common Cuckoo was recorded on film, or Swinnerton's observations on cuckoo egg colour, first published in *The Ibis* in 1918.

The narrative swings from the Ice Age to present day, and from Africa to England, much as the species itself has done over the centuries. It presents an informed, informative and readable diversion, tying together many threads as the chapters progress through the seasons, and we see the 'arms race' between brood parasite and host take shape with depth and insight.

The book arrives bang up to date with the preliminary findings of the British Trust for Ornithology's radio-tracking of 'Lyster', 'Chris' and other tagged cuckoos as they (hopefully) find their way to and from tropical Africa and Britain every year. This



scheme has been adding to our knowledge of cuckoo movements every season, signalling previously unsuspected staging posts and migration routes.

There have been several recent books on cuckoos, their evolution and behaviour, but

none so readable and engaging. Davies uncovers the behavioural deceptions of the species in a rambling biological detective story that will keep you guessing on the different ways these parasites cheat other species.

David Callahan

More info

- *Cuckoo: Cheating by Nature* by Nick Davies (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2015).
- 289 pages, 21 colour photographs, 16 line drawings, one map.
- ISBN 9781408856567. Hbk, £16.99.

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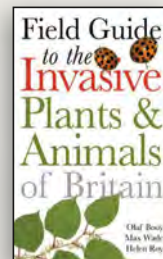
A collection of Bill Oddie's humorous and informative writings is **Heather O'Connor's** choice book this month.

AS the familiar face and voice of birding broadcasting for more than three decades, Bill Oddie is one of our most prolific wildlife commentators. As well as fronting television and radio programmes, he has written widely in the press – as well as on his own online blog – on subjects close to his heart, always proving informative and entertaining, and never one to shirk controversy.

His latest book *Bill Oddie Unplucked* is an entertaining collection of his recently published musings about birds and birding, as well as the

wildlife he has seen on his many travels over the years. Covering a wide array of subjects, from a less than satisfactory press trip to the Galápagos Islands in the 1980s and recent disagreements over noisy squadrons of local Ring-necked Parakeets to encounters with Orcas in Argentina and Iceland, and with an invisible Tiger in India. Written in his witty and inimitable style, this enthralling book is also illustrated throughout with Bill's charming and comic line drawings.

As well as the hundreds of birding books we have available in our online store, you'll find many new wildlife titles too. Released this month is the second edition of the bestselling photographic guide *British Moths*, which features an additional 800 species as well as improved and updated photographs. The fascinating *Field Guide to the Invasive Plants and Animals in Britain* will appeal to all conservationists and amateur naturalists keen to identify these uninvited species and their impact on Britain's biodiversity. These titles, plus hundreds more, can be found at www.birdwatch.co.uk/store. ■



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THROUGHOUT the bird world, examples of strange and seemingly inexplicable behaviours abound that raise questions such as: why do male fairywrens bring flowers

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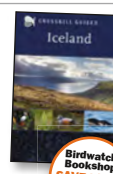
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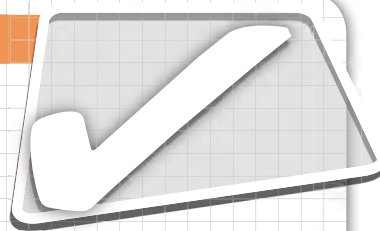
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EXPERT ADVICE



THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



DOMINIC MITCHELL
is *Birdwatch*'s founder and Managing Editor, and author and editor of several bird books. He has been birding for more than 40 years.



CHRIS HARBARD
After many years at the RSPB, Chris is now a tour leader, writer and editor, dividing his time between Britain and the USA.



DAVID CALLAHAN
Prior to joining *Birdwatch* as staff writer, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



MIKE ALIBONE
has been birding since the late 1960s. He is the Northamptonshire county recorder and *Birdwatch*'s optics expert.



RICHARD JAMES
is a wildlife adviser at the RSPB, with a thorough knowledge of invertebrates, reptiles and amphibians, as well as birds.



MIKE LANGMAN
is a full-time bird illustrator whose work has featured in numerous books, as well as at almost every RSPB reserve.

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Everything you ever wanted to know about Rooks.

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How installing nestboxes in your garden can help declining breeding birds.

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87 It takes two

Find out all about the duetting behaviour of Tawny Owl and other species.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

How weather affects song

BIRDS are starting to sing in earnest this month, as resident species prepare for the breeding season and early migrants are establishing their territories. However, early spring is notorious for its unpredictable weather, and this can affect a bird's song and hence the timing of its eventual breeding.

Weather conditions can affect audibility, so strong winds may drown out a song with noise from tree branches and leaves. On a fine calm morning, sound will travel very well and can be as much as 20 times more effective than a song at midday. While it is known that territorial factors and female fertility form sound reasons for dawn singing, there is also the fact that on a cold morning there may be less food for some species until later in the day.

Song Thrushes increase their vocal activity on mild mornings or after a sharp frost, which may have conditions that promote sound audibility. Woodland songbirds with higher perches tend to sing less in windy conditions; this includes Song Thrush, Blackbird and Common Chiffchaff, but Mistle Thrush (or 'Stormcock') is an exception. Rain may not change the singing of all birds and can even stimulate Blackbirds. Green Woodpecker was colloquially known as 'Rainbird', as it was thought to sing just before rain.

A study of 44 species of North American songbirds shows that those birds which experience dramatic seasonal changes in weather, from wet to dry, have the most variable songs, with more high and low notes and a variable tempo and loudness.

See if you can detect a difference in the birds singing around you, depending on the weather. Listen each morning or evening, when bird song is at its peak, and note down which species is singing over a

period of time – 30 minutes, for example – and for how long. Listen for Woodpigeon, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Robin, Wren, Chaffinch and tits. Note the weather conditions: is it fine or overcast, windy or calm, dry or wet, foggy or clear? What is the temperature and is there a frost?

Keeping a record of such information will add to your birding knowledge and enjoyment, as you learn more about the singers in your garden. ■

Song Thrushes sing more on mild, quiet mornings, when they are more likely to be heard.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Understanding Rooks

MARCH is when rookeries come to life. These noisy colonies are a feature of the British countryside and Rooks are a familiar sight, absent only from upland areas.

Rooks start nesting in March so they can take advantage of plentiful earthworms for their young when they hatch in April. The species builds its nests using freshly broken twigs and branches, usually 30-60 cm in length; one nest was found to contain almost 500 twigs. In the east of its range Rook's nests are regularly co-opted by Amur Falcons. Red-footed Falcon, Kestrel and Long-eared Owl will also use them.

The biggest rookery in Britain is at Hatton Castle, Aberdeenshire. It once held 6,700 nests, but now has about 2,500, making it still the largest single colony of any landbird in Britain. The largest rookeries in the world are probably in Kazakhstan, where a single colony can hold 50,000 pairs. While most rookeries are built in trees, one in Azerbaijan consists

of 250 nests in a reedbed.

There were an estimated 990,000 Rook nests in Britain in 2009. Roosts can be huge. There are urban roosts of 500,000 in Poland, while one in Scotland contained 65,000 birds and Buckenham Marshes RSPB, Norfolk, has a roost of Rooks and Jackdaws which numbers 55,000.

The species stores acorns in winter, and its scientific name *frugilegus* means 'food-gathering'. Unlike other members of the crow family, Rooks rarely take the eggs and young of other birds.

The collective nouns used for a group of Rooks are parliament, building, clamour and storytelling.

The two Rook subspecies, *C f frugilegus* in the west and *C f pastinator* in the east, are found in separate populations and may represent distinct species. According to DNA studies, Rook's closest relative is the critically endangered Hawaiian Crow.

Members of the crow family are known to be intelligent, and

research by Cambridge University has shown that captive Rooks can use more than one tool to solve a problem, without being shown how. This equates their intelligence to that of Chimpanzees.

Folklore says that if Rooks

abandon their colony a death is imminent, while if they build their nests high it will be a fine summer, but if the nests are low there will be wind and rain. The oldest British Rook was 22 years and 11 months. ■



Rooks start breeding in March, so any local rookeries will be alive with activity this month.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

BUILDING SKILLS

Nestboxes for conservation

NESTBOXES offer garden birds places to breed where there might otherwise be none. They can also be used as part of conservation plans to help certain species. Here are some threatened British birds that might benefit from nestboxes.

Red list

- **Spotted Flycatcher:** this species uses an open-fronted nestbox with a low front to allow a good view out. The box should be positioned 2-4 m above ground within climbing vegetation on a wall. With a breeding population of 33,000 territories, the species has declined by 89 per cent over 44 years.
- **Marsh Tit:** a small hole-fronted nestbox with a 25-mm hole, sited less than a metre from the ground, is ideal. The British population has declined by 73 per cent over 44 years, with just 41,000 territories.
- **Willow Tit:** small hole-fronted nestboxes with a 25-mm hole, sited 1-5 m from the ground with a clear entrance, are preferred. The British population has

declined by a huge 92 per cent over 44 years and there are now fewer than 3,400 territories.

- **Starling:** this species will use a medium-sized hole-fronted nestbox with a 45-mm hole, sited 2.5 m above the ground. Although still numerous, its population has fallen by 1,800,000 pairs, a 53 per cent decline over 16 years.
- **Tree Sparrow:** a hole-fronted box with a 28-mm hole (which excludes House Sparrows) should be sited more than 2 m above the ground. Several boxes can be placed close together, as the species will nest colonially. Its population was estimated at 180,000 territories in 2009; despite huge past declines, however, it has increased by 113 per cent over 16 years.

Amber list

- **Common Goldeneye:** a large hole-fronted box with an entrance 115 mm in diameter, sited about 10 m from the water's edge and 4-10 m above the ground, is ideal. A relatively recent colonist, this species' population has grown to

200 females, thanks mainly to nestbox provision in Scotland.

- **Stock Dove:** a large open-fronted nestbox is best as a substitute for a natural cavity in a rotten tree. It should be sited at least 3 m from the ground in a tree at the edge of woodland, overlooking open fields. There are now 260,000 territories in Britain, which may constitute more than half of the European population.
- **Common Swift:** this species traditionally nests cavities in old roof spaces. New buildings have no such holes, so boxes must be provided, positioned as high as possible with a clear drop beneath the entrance hole. The British population is 87,000 pairs, and a 39 per cent decline over 16 years is attributed to a lack of breeding sites.
- **Pied Flycatcher:** nestboxes with a 28-mm hole should be positioned 2-4 m above the ground. The provision of nestboxes has enabled the species to expand its range in some areas. The British population is 17-20,000 pairs,



MARC GUYT (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

The best place to site your nestbox depends on which species you want to attract.

representing a 52 per cent decline over 16 years.

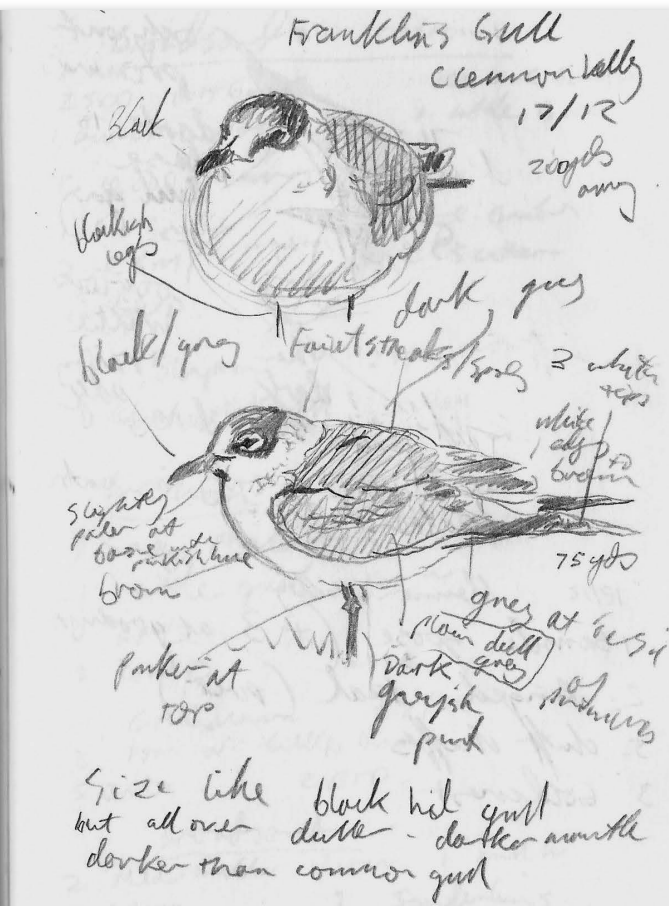
- **Crested Tit:** the endemic subspecies *scoticus* is confined to ancient Scots Pine forest in northern Scotland, and there are just 1,000-2,000 pairs. A pair will use deep hole-fronted nestboxes with a 28-mm hole and filled with sawdust and wood shavings.

For more information about Red and Amber listed birds see bit.ly/bw273ConservationConcern. Nestbox plans can be found at bit.ly/bw273BT0Nestboxes. ■

Make great field sketches



dull grey
 grey
 brown feathers
 all white tips
 white tips to tail + outer tail all white
 15-6 white premmes tips



HOW many of us have tried putting pencil to notepad in the field? Not just to write down a log of what we have seen, but to elaborate a sighting with field notes and a sketch? It seems very few in recent years. When asked why, the answers that came back include: it's too difficult; whatever I draw looks nothing like the bird I've seen; it takes too long; I'll take a photo instead; I know what I'm looking at, so I don't bother; I use a field guide to help me; and I don't carry a notebook.

You might find yourself nodding to some of these replies. But are they really just excuses, or perhaps simply laziness? Does “using a field guide to help” mean more time looking at a

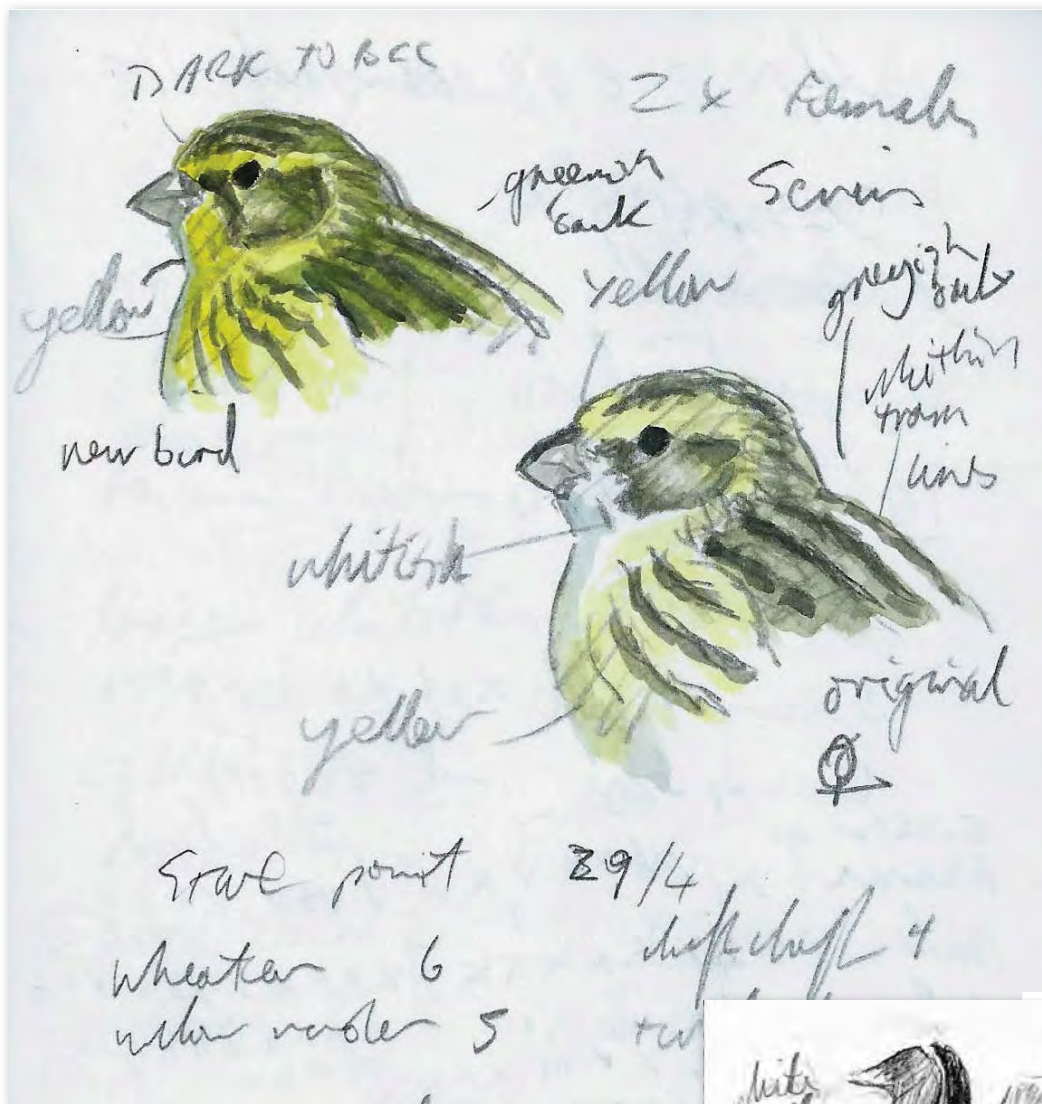
Perhaps also the replies are a sign of the times. More and more birders use digital recording systems (such as voice notes or sound recordings), while short reports find their way onto Twitter and text messages. Without detailed notes, however, a record could be lost from ornithological history.

A camera is the must-have bit of kit for the 21st century birder. Cheap cameras and mobile phones can capture some form of record shot when used with a telescope, or even with their own built-in super-zoom lenses. Today's cameras also have video and sound-recording capability. However, one or two photographs of a trickier species

Making field notes means you have to really look at the bird. Comprehensive notes show that you have studied every aspect of the bird. A good set of notes and sketches will serve as a great reference when writing up a description. They will enliven the pages of a notebook, and in time these books will become treasured and very personal items. In years to come, looking back at your old notes will bring back vivid memories of a particular bird – thanks to the

The theory of left (logic and reasoning) and right (creativity and intuition) brain thinking seems to have been dispelled, with studies showing we all use the whole of our brain, which has much inter-connectivity between the two sides. If drawing, sketching or creativity is not something you do very often, the process of making notes and annotated field sketches will undoubtedly stimulate parts of the brain that might be under-used.

Multi-sensory learning has given us new insights into our ability to take in and remember information. The activity of thoroughly observing and then writing and sketching will spark communications between



Left: these two female Serins were sketched to show the different plumages of the two individuals; water colour was added soon after, following the annotated notes made at the time.

Below: this Surf Scoter drawing shows the value of quick and rudimentary field sketches which are not designed to show fine detail, but still convey accurately observer impressions and key characters which help confirm the identification. You don't have to be an accomplished artist to achieve satisfying results like this.

different parts of your brain.

So will making a field sketch make you a better birder? The answer must be yes. If you spend time studying, looking at shape, plumage, colour, tone, proportions – all things you must do in order to process the information and draw or write what you see – it will improve your observational skills and, importantly, your curiosity. Curiosity, observation and deduction are key traits for any birder. When you really start to look you'll see that virtually every bird, even at species level, has its own individuality.

Training yourself to make quick, efficient field notes using simple sketching methods will arm you with information that can be cross checked with a field guide when the bird has gone, and will help you to identify any bird you see anywhere in the world at the time or after the event.

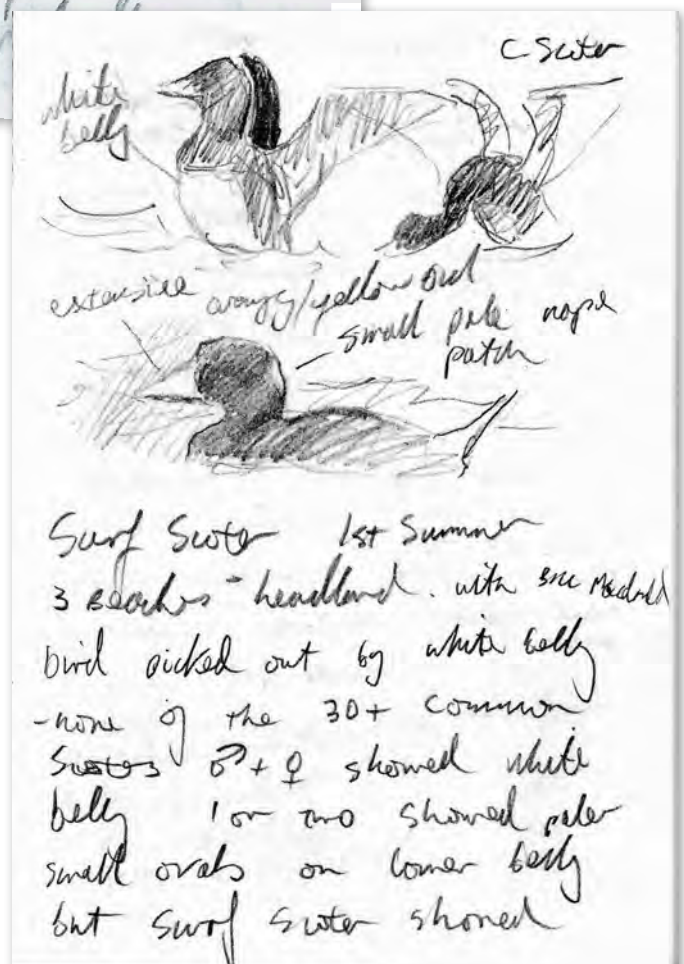
Here's an experiment to test how well experienced birders know a common species. Without looking at any sort of reference, try drawing a pencil sketch of the

head pattern of a male House Sparrow or a Blue Tit. Add notes describing the colours. When you've finished, refer back to a field guide to check how accurate your sketch is.

Even the most competent birders struggle with this challenge. However, in a month's time try it again – you'll probably achieve something much better than your first attempt because you've made a physical effort to discover and record where those markings are. The observation and learning process will have been much stronger.

Next month: back to basics – which came first, the egg or the bird? ■

- If you have a go at Mike's challenge, send your attempts to us and we'll print our favourites on the Letters page. You can scan or photograph your drawings and email them to editorial@birdwatch.co.uk or post them to Birdwatch magazine, The Chocolate Factory, 5 Clarendon Road, London N22 6XJ.



YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED



Q On a trip to San Diego, California, USA, in October I managed to identify the majority of the birds I saw, using my *Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America*. I think the bird of prey (right) is a Cooper's Hawk. I am not sure about the gull (above) – the dark legs make me think it is a Black-legged Kittiwake. Your comments will be much appreciated. Ewan Stephenson, via email



A American bird tour leader Alvaro Jaramillo replies: "The gull looks like a near-adult Heermann's Gull, but the photo is over-exposed, making it look odd. The bird of prey looks good for a Cooper's Hawk to me, with those fine, teardrop-shaped streaks below." ■



Q Can you please identify this bird? I photographed it in January 2009, but while looking through my photos realised I couldn't identify it. At the time we had several Pied Wagtails visiting us and I assumed it was one of them, but I now doubt that identification. Dave Carter, via email

A David Callahan replies: "You are correct in thinking that it wasn't one of the Pied Wagtails – your bird is in fact a Grey Wagtail. To be precise, it's a first-winter: note the pinkish tinge to the breast, a colour also present to the rear of its supercilium, which in an adult would be plain white. Add to this the plain throat (which adults also develop in winter), the pink base to the bill and the lack of black on the rest of the head, and the age and identification is confirmed. No other British wagtail species shows this patterning." ■



Q Can you help ID this bird? I've checked my bird books, but no luck. It was photographed on the River Allen at Allen Banks, Northumberland. John Nixon, via email

A Dominic Mitchell replies: "The typical 'sawbill' beak and swept back tuft of the russet head, together with the sharp division from the pale neck (as well as habitat and location) indicate that this is a female Goosander. It looks like an adult, judging by that sharply demarcated border to the reddish head and dark lores (immatures have white markings there). The mid-grey body with a white wing patch confirm the identification (though the over-exposure of the image has concealed this last feature somewhat)." ■

Q Digiscoping – I need advice on which scope and camera is best for an amateur birdwatcher please. *Clarkey, via the Birdwatch website forum*

A *Mike Alibone replies:* “There is no straightforward answer, as it depends on your budget and your expectations of the standards you are attempting to achieve or would be happy with. Almost any telescope can be used with a DSLR or compact camera in combination with the appropriate adapter. Practiced digiscopers achieve very good results with basic equipment, and many telescope manufacturers will also offer advice and supply adapters compatible with their own ranges of optics.

You should first decide if you will be mainly birding and using your camera occasionally on your telescope, in which case you need an

adapter which allows rapid coupling/decoupling of a compact camera. Alternatively, if you are going to use your telescope as a camera lens for a DSLR camera then there is the potential for lengthier periods of time spent removing/replacing eyepieces and adapter rings.

The basic rules for choosing optics also apply when selecting digiscoping equipment. A larger objective will gather more light and a low magnification (perhaps 15x) eyepiece or zoom is advised, as it can be remarkably difficult to find and follow a moving bird at high magnification. The camera’s optical zoom should ideally be around 5x. Lastly, don’t underestimate the importance of a stable tripod, and you should consider factoring in a counterbalance head (sliding rail or spring-tensioned) to accommodate the weight of the camera, especially if a heavier DSLR is used.” ■

Q I heard my first cuckoo this year in February, in Cefn-Coed-Y-Cymmer, Merthyr Tydfil, South Wales! Isn’t this very early? *Estell Hudson, via Facebook*

A *David Callahan replies:* “At this time of year, your bird is much more likely to be one of the commoner members of the pigeon family making a ‘cooing’ sound – it could have been Woodpigeon or Stock Dove, but Collared Dove is also traditionally described as being distantly reminiscent of Common Cuckoo (left).

The average arrival date of cuckoos on the south coast of England, according to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), is currently 19 April, and none has ever been reported earlier than March. Interestingly, it is now possible to follow cuckoos ringed by the BTO as part of their ongoing radio-tracking scheme to discover where the species stops over and winters after it leaves our shores. To find out where the current crop of adults are at present, visit the scheme’s website at www.bto.org/science/migration/tracking-studies/cuckoo-tracking.” ■



VOGELARTINFO (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

Q I took this picture (below) on the east coast of Yorkshire – what is this bird and how long do they stick around for? *@livewire1957, via Twitter*

A *David Callahan replies:* “Your bird is a Waxwing, one of our more charismatic and unpredictable winter visitors. Every year variable numbers of this characterful, berry-eating sub-Arctic passerine reach our shores from northern Eurasia – in some years in their tens of thousands, in others (like this winter) in very small numbers.

The species is a short-distance migrant, but irrupts when there is severe weather in the northern part of its range, or when the berry crop

fails. There is also some evidence of a 10-year irruption cycle, though more work is needed to confirm this, and possible causes. Waxwings return across the North Sea during early spring, and it is rare to find any here after April. Fortunately for birders, when they do visit Britain Waxwings often frequent ornamental berry bushes in supermarket car parks.” ■



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in to: **Your Questions Answered, Birdwatch, The Chocolate Factory, 5 Clarendon Road, London N22 6XJ.**



ALBERT BRIDGE (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

Q There’s a Pied Wagtail that’s taken a liking to the wing mirror on my work van, and also headbutts the windscreen – why? @ *Quarryskull, via Twitter*

A *Richard James, RSPB Wildlife Adviser, replies:*

“This is commonly seen behaviour, particularly in late winter or early spring. At this time of year, birds are establishing

their territories and will chase away rivals. Unfortunately, birds are unable to recognise a reflection and believe the image in the mirrors and windscreen is such a rival that needs to be attacked. This is a waste of time and energy for the bird, and it can be prevented by putting a cover over the windscreen and wing mirrors.” ■

Q Could you give me a definite ID on this regular visitor to my feeding station in south Leicestershire. I’m fairly sure it’s a Marsh Tit. *@livewire1957, via Twitter*

A *Dominic Mitchell replies:* “Willow and Marsh Tit are a classic tricky species pair, but we can indeed say that this is a Marsh Tit, as the diagnostic white nub at the base of the upper mandible is clearly visible. Supporting features include the glossy cap, restricted ‘bib’ and paler underparts – see *Birdwatch* 225: 24-26 for an up-to-date ID guide to these species.” ■



'Scottish Birdfair' back for fourth year

SCOTLAND'S Big Nature Festival is expected to attract some 6,000 wildlife enthusiasts when it returns for a fourth year this May at a brand new location. The two-day event, which includes the Scottish Birdfair, is being held at Musselburgh Lagoons by the Firth of Forth, East Lothian, on 23-24th.

Widely recognised as one of Scotland's premier locations for birding, the site has been created on land claimed from the sea using pulverised fuel ash, a by-product of Cockenzie Power Station. Mixed grassland, woodland and wetland make up 134 ha of spectacular habitat, owned by East Lothian Council and Scottish Power, which is of significant value for wildlife conservation.

The bird reserve and lagoon 8 have gained national recognition for their importance for wildfowl and wading birds and were

notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 2001. These areas are the only major high-water roost sites between Cramond and Aberlady Bay and have also been included in the Firth of Forth Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar designations.

Hundreds of bird species have been recorded at Musselburgh Lagoons, including Meadow Pipit, Oystercatcher, Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank, Grey Plover, Willow Warbler, Eurasian Whimbrel and Reed Bunting. Ducks nest on the grassy banks of the nearby pools, while a myriad of moths and butterflies are attracted to the meadows.

Over the course of the weekend there will be plenty of attractions for keen birders, including specialist talks from well-known conservationists, a seabird cruise, bird-ringing demonstrations,

wildlife photography workshops, optics demos and nature walks.

The festival boasts more than 100 exhibitors, and families with children should find lots to keep them entertained, from pond dipping and bush crafts to science workshops and storytelling. The event is also part of the Scottish Government's Year of Food and Drink Scotland 2015 programme.

All proceeds will go towards conserving and protecting Scottish wildlife.

Further information

- Tickets: £12 adults, £10 concessions (RSPB members), £2 children (up to 17), under 5s free, £20 weekend pass, £18 weekend concession.
- Scotland's Big Nature Festival is organised by RSPB Scotland, with support from East Lothian Council, EventScotland, British Trust for Ornithology (BTO),

Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC) and *Birdwatch* magazine.

- For more information, to buy tickets and for a full list of attractions and exhibitors go to: www.bignaturefestival.org.uk.



Eurasian Curlew, which has substantially declined in Britain, is the subject of this year's conservation project.

ANDY HAY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



News round-up

MAIN STORY Birdfair raises record-breaking funds

Birdfair handed a record-breaking £280,000 cheque to BirdLife to help designate marine protected areas.

- bit.ly/bw273Birdfair

Mass seabird deaths on Pacific coast of North America

The Pacific coast of North America has been experiencing an

'unprecedented' case of seabird deaths, with up to 100,000 Cassin's Auklets washed up dead on beaches.

- bit.ly/bw273cassins

Hawk and Owl Trust lose Chris Packham and court controversy

A surprise tweet from Chris Packham saw him resign as Hawk and Owl Trust president, while the organisation seems determined to go ahead with a translocation scheme which few support.

- bit.ly/bw273hawk&owl

In the digital edition

MARCH'S digital edition has a bevy of bonus materials, including:

- Video of Bonaparte's and Black-headed Gulls.
- Footage and photos of many rarities and scarcities from the entire region.
- Extra images and movie clips of penguins and other South Georgian specialities, as well as selected reintroduced species in Britain.
- Sound files of selected species featured in the magazine.

The digital edition is available for PC, Mac, iPhone/iPad and Android. Sample editions are free, and subscriptions or single issues can be purchased. Visit www.pocketmags.com/birdwatch to find out more. ■

LISTCHECK

Updating avian taxonomy

Out of the swamp

PURPLE Swamphen is a widely dispersed 'supertramp' species which has colonised most of the Old World's wetlands from Spain through to New Zealand.

African Swamphen *Porphyrio madagascariensis* is already split by some, but other subspecies have long been touted as potential full species. A large, just-published analysis of the whole genus using up to four mitochondrial and two nuclear genes has revealed the relationships and colonisation history of *Porphyrio* across the world, incorporating all recognised taxa.

There are up to 14 Purple Swamphen *P. porphyrio* subspecies currently accepted, falling into groups defined by variations in the colour of the head and scapular feathers. All were included in the analysis, which confirmed the taxonomic level of existing species and revealed six separate branches or clades of Purple Swamphen which may be of species level: nominate *porphyrio* (Iberia and North Africa); *P. madagascariensis*; *P. indicus* (Indonesia); *P. pulverulentus* (Philippines); *P. poliocephalus* (Turkey to India and South-East Asia); and *P. melanotus* (Australasia to Samoa). ■

Reference

- Garcia-Ramirez, J C, and Trewick, S A. 2015. Dispersal and speciation in purple swamphens (Rallidae: *Porphyrio*). *The Auk* 132: 140-155.



This nominate Purple Swamphen could now be one of three species in the Western Palearctic, as *madagascariensis* and *poliocephalus* are also present in the region, in Egypt and Turkey respectively.

BILL BASTON (WWW.BILLBASTON.COM)

Listening and learning



PHIL WINTER

The familiar *tu-wit tu-woo* hooting of Tawny Owl is actually a duet between the male and female birds.

MARCH is a good time to listen for the calls of Tawny Owls, which are just starting to breed. The long hoots come from the males and can be imitated, usually eliciting a response.

The territorial song of the male is a quavering *huu-uu-u*. The oft-quoted vocalisation, familiarised by Shakespeare as *tu-wit tu-woo*, with a pause between the two phrases, is in fact a duet between

a pair of owls. The female calls *kew-ick*, usually responding to the male's hoot, but when singing together it is not easy to say who is answering whom. Males will also *kew-ick*, but not as frequently as females, which will also hoot but have a more wailing quality. If you have Tawny Owls near you, go and listen for them and try to identify the male and female as they duet.

More than 200 bird species are known to duet, and most of these live in tropical regions. Some of the best-known include African shrikes, especially boubous, African robin-chats, Australasian honeyeaters and magpie-larks, and many New World wrens. There are also duettists in temperate regions, including Tawny and some other owls, as well as Canada Geese which give alternating honks. It is known among pairs of California Towhees and has been found among harmonising

Little Spotted Kiwis. The overlapping piping of Oystercatchers could also be regarded as duetting.

There are many theories as to why birds duet. In the tropics it may help them become reproductively active at the same time, which is important as there are no seasonal stimuli such as changing day length. It may strengthen the pair bond and so help with successful reproduction; such species tend to be monogamous and to hold territories year round, as well as being less likely to have extra-pair liaisons.

Research into duetting species also indicates that it may form a co-operative defence, with the calls of two individuals being more of a deterrent to intruding birds. Studies show that migratory species don't duet; the behaviour appears to evolve only in the absence of migration, hence involving species with more

sedentary lifestyles.

Duetting can take several forms: simultaneous duetting involves birds vocalising together in unison; overlapping is where different phrases partly overlap; and antiphonal is where male and female sounds occur consecutively. Occasionally two males will duet, as found in Long-tailed Manakins which sing in unison, with the dominant male eventually mating with a female. Researchers playing recordings of a male Tropical Boubou found a local male would sing over the recording, as if trying to drown it out.

Antiphonal duetting often involves totally different notes or phrases from each partner, but the combination sounds as if it comes from one bird, especially when the pair is positioned close together. When one bird answers the other, the time difference is as small as a tenth of a second.

One well-practised duettist is Plain-tailed Wren of Ecuador. Several male and female birds will group together to produce between them what sounds like a single melody. Research shows that each male has two phrases, and females have two further phrases; these are sung alternately with many variations on each phrase. Recordings demonstrate that a male sings the phrases with a specific pause between them. When a female responds, the male will rapidly answer, reducing the period between each call to maintain a duet with no pauses. ■

SUNDAY HIGH TIDES IN MARCH

Full moon date is Thursday 5 March

	1st	8th	15th	22nd	29th
Exe Estuary (Starcross)	03.13	08.24	00.36	08.05	02.02
Devon	16.02	20.40	13.19	20.27	14.50
Poole Harbour (town quay)	06.39	02.13	04.28	10.16	06.09
Dorset	19.17	10.18	17.33	22.41	19.18
Langstone Harbour (Northney)	08.40	01.00	06.14	00.31	07.47
Hampshire	21.18	13.12	19.04	12.53	20.35
Thames Estuary (Sheerness)	09.18	01.55	07.03	01.38	08.32
Kent	21.46	14.15	19.37	14.04	20.59
London Bridge	10.26	03.14	08.11	02.56	09.38
Greater London	22.57	16.06	20.45	15.22	22.05
Colne Estuary (Wivenhoe)	08.59	01.30	06.37	01.12	08.09
Essex	21.32	13.49	19.15	13.38	20.42
Blakeney Harbour	03.43	08.05	01.14	07.42	02.54
Norfolk	16.11	20.20	13.51	20.04	15.27
Hunstanton	03.20	07.51	00.39	07.31	02.21
Norfolk	15.48	20.01	13.17	19.48	14.51
Blacktoft	03.42	08.14	01.14	07.51	02.53
Yorkshire	16.10	20.28	13.50	20.12	15.24

	1st	8th	15th	22nd	29th
Teesmouth	00.36	05.05	10.33	04.49	–
Durham/Yorkshire	12.59	17.13	23.27	17.05	12.08
Holy Island	11.28	03.53	09.00	03.34	10.31
Northumberland	–	16.06	21.50	15.55	23.22
Firth of Forth (Cockenzie)	11.52	04.09	09.24	04.02	10.57
Lothian	–	16.18	22.19	16.19	23.54
Morecambe Bay	08.25	00.32	05.57	00.13	01.30
Lancashire	20.57	12.46	18.43	12.33	14.14
Dee Estuary (Hilbre)	08.06	00.09	05.37	–	07.15
Cheshire	20.38	12.22	18.23	12.06	20.02
Loughor Estuary (Burry Port)	03.20	07.42	00.41	07.26	02.22
Carmarthenshire	15.52	19.57	13.28	19.48	15.07
Severn Estuary (Berkeley)	04.42	09.25	02.06	09.04	03.41
Gloucestershire	17.20	21.40	14.48	21.25	16.24
Belfast	07.57	00.23	05.44	00.01	07.13
Co Down	20.33	12.34	18.30	12.20	20.01
Dublin (North Wall)	08.38	00.56	06.22	00.45	07.52
Co Dublin	21.13	13.07	19.12	13.03	20.43



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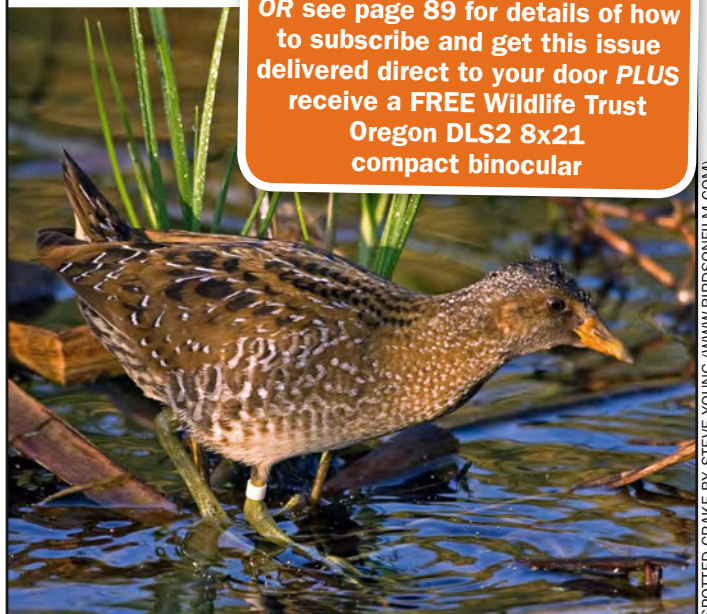
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SPOTTED CRAKE BY STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

- Always scarce and never easy to see, Spotted Crake breeds sparsely in Britain and also occurs on passage – a time when vagrant Little or Baillon's Crakes can also appear. With often brief or difficult views, getting to grips with any crake in the field is rarely straightforward, so Andy Stoddart has some essential advice on how to nail these skulking reedbed species.
- The familiar sound of spring's first cuckoo is just around the corner, but there's far more to this intriguing bird than meets the eye – not least its epic inter-continental migrations between Europe and Africa, now revealed in intimate detail by satellite tracking, and the fact that different populations are ecologically separated by different habitats. David Callahan reports.
- Another migrant returning this month is House Martin, a species which has declined drastically in Britain. Ian Woodward of the British Trust for Ornithology looks at the possible causes and asks readers to get their citizen scientist lab coats on by taking part in a new UK House Martin Survey.
- In the run-up to Scotland's Big Nature Festival, we take a special look at the event's Bird of Focus, Eurasian Curlew – another species in serious decline nationally – as well as a retrospective on the successful reintroduction of White-tailed Eagle, 30 years after the project to bring the species back to the country began.

Plus all the key finders' accounts and big stories as spring gets into gear, rarity and scarcity round-ups for Britain, Ireland and the Western Palearctic from BirdGuides.com, reviews of optics, books, apps and software, columnists Mark Avery and Mark Cocker, and your birding questions answered by our team of expert ornithologists.

**April issue on sale
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your letters & photos

Tell us what you think. Write to Dominic Mitchell, Managing Editor, at: **Birdwatch, The Chocolate Factory, 5 Clarendon Road, London N22 6XJ** or email **letters@birdwatch.co.uk**



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Anti-climatic

I would like to comment on Mark Cocker's response to my article (*Birdwatch* 270: 40-43) in last month's magazine (page 90).

His column does not accurately reflect the thrust of the article. One of the central points was to make clear that we cannot take the isolated instance of the nesting of two pairs of Black-winged Stilts as evidence of climate change. There is an obvious difference between this claim and one that stilt nesting might be a consequence of this.

I also did not claim that non-anthropogenic causes were due to the long-term periodical changes in the axial inclination of the earth, as Mark suggests. Instead I pointed out that these are extremely complex and the result of many factors.

Mark also wanted to see more party politics in conservation. Political rhetoric frequently displays cleverness that does not reflect valid reasoning, and smuggles in spurious conclusions. People are right to be wary of this.

I did not say that

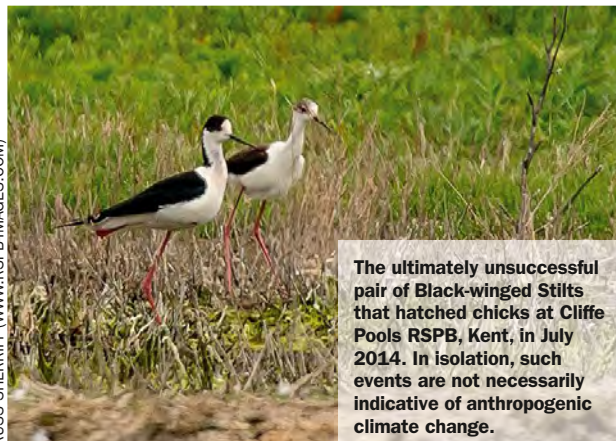
conservation organisations should not 'do' politics. I wrote: "To gain and maintain trust, conservation organisations need to distance themselves from politics ... but without reducing their lobbying power."

This is the one point on which we genuinely disagree. I believe that conservationists would do better to rise above party politics and express their passion through more publicity-seeking means when necessary; this is more likely to be noticed by those who have become disillusioned by party politics.

Raising awareness of the plight of nature to the wider public will require high-profile campaigns along with nurturing a more general love of wildlife. In this I have no disagreement and greatly admire what Mark has achieved in this respect.

It is, however, of vital importance that conservation bodies, along with well-known and deservedly acclaimed authors such as Mark, ensure that their love of the natural world exemplifies accuracy, reason, passion and, on occasion, media-savvy theatrics when they respond to the work of others.

Adrian Brockless, via email



RUSSELL SHERRIFF (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

The ultimately unsuccessful pair of Black-winged Stilts that hatched chicks at Cliffe Pools RSPB, Kent, in July 2014. In isolation, such events are not necessarily indicative of anthropogenic climate change.

Birds know no class

I read with disbelief the letter entitled 'Different class' (*Birdwatch* 271: 92), which put forward the absurd idea that if we got rid of the so-called class system, then wildlife would make a comeback.

I am definitely not pro-hunting nor a Tory, and I'm against raptor persecution, but the fact is the only areas you can see good flocks of buntings and finches in my local area of Warwickshire are on hunting estates, due to the game cover and food crops which are planted. The surrounding farmland is a green desert of autumn-sown crops. There is also an excellent variety of raptors, but shouldn't the nasty, evil, upper-class landowners have destroyed all these?

Corn Buntings and European Turtle Doves don't recognise class and are declining rapidly, but of course they're not as fashionable as birds of prey and so don't get as much media attention.

Let's stop these immature pantomime politics – they won't help the cause of wildlife conservation.

Chris Lane, via email

Calling in the Hawfinches

I made an interesting discovery about Hawfinches on a recent trip to Gothenburg, Sweden. I found that the city, like others I've visited in northern and eastern Europe, has these birds present in its parks.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

Understandably wanting to get closer to one that I could hear calling in a tree, somewhat out of desperation, I tried imitating the bird's *spick* call, using my tongue against the roof of my mouth – a bit like making a *tsk* noise to express one's irritation at something.

Rather to my surprise, I succeeded in getting the bird to continue calling while I was able to edge right underneath it. It was obviously curious and despite the fact that I was fully visible, not only stayed put, but did a lot of neck-craning to look at me as well as a cute sideways shuffle along its perch. Meanwhile a second individual started calling and came closer, although I didn't want to take my bins off the first bird to try to find it. I was able to successfully watch the bird in this way for several minutes, out in the open and at a distance of about 20 feet.

Obviously these birds are much more tolerant of human presence than their British counterparts, so I doubt this will be of much use over here, but it's a trick well worth bearing in mind on the Continent. Along with some lovely very tame urban Goosanders and a delightful 'Northern' Long-tailed Tit (which I always maintain are more exciting to look at than some new species), the encounter greatly enriched a pre-Christmas city break.

Alan Pearson, via email

In the black

I'VE been going to a site in the North-East for many years and always enjoy seeing the Black Grouse there. A few days ago, I was lucky enough to be able to photograph this bird (right) at reasonably close range. It was sitting on a wall and preening, and seemed unconcerned as I took some shots. Usually the birds are quite jumpy when people are watching them, but this male simply kept looking at me to make sure I wasn't getting any closer. They had a particularly good breeding season last year and there were a lot more birds on the moors than usual. It's always good to see them.

Hilary Chambers, via email



Whitecap

THIS surprise garden visitor appeared as fresh snow was lying in our Nottingham garden on 28 December.

We feel sure this is a leucistic Blackcap, as it behaves in the same way as the other three 'normal' Blackcaps that winter in our garden. It feeds on fat, apples and the black ivy berries in our hawthorn hedge. It is extremely wary, but this is probably the only reason it has survived. We assume it is a Continental bird that has migrated here, which makes its survival even more remarkable. We have been unable to find any other photos of a leucistic Blackcap, so thought it would be nice to share our image.

Lynne and Ron Demaine, via email

Join the debate online

twitter

• **Here's a selection of comments from our Twitter page:**

@TweeterBirdSong

"Nestboxes can make great gifts :) Here's one I made for my Dad last year ..."



@webster_cat "Woody being daring again at the feeder box"



@AliDriverEA "Good to see @EnvAgency @WWTStear is @BirdwatchExtra site of the month. More than just key part of #Severn flood mgmt strategy."

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• **On the news that a newly designed collar successfully stops cats from killing birds:**

Toby Coulson: "Any people who claim they are animal lovers but own a cat are hypocrites."

Barry Farquharson: "Does it work on 'rogue' gamekeepers too?"

Kaz Horrocks: "Yes, but only if you fasten it tight enough."

Anne Martin: "I am quite surprised that an avian ecologist owns a cat and lets it out in the garden."



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STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

The winner



JANUARY'S photo challenge was to capture images of birds in winter.

Steve Young said: "The winter photo challenge was the most popular yet, with a variety of species submitted, the majority of which were garden birds."

"As expected Robin featured strongly with a number of entries, but my winning shot this month is of a Fieldfare in a very wintry setting by John Finlayson. The bird's fluffed-up feathers give some idea of how cold it was, and with snow on the bill it

looks like it had been feeding on the ground before moving to the tree.

"Snow on the branches would have made the shot even better, but you can't have everything and the falling snow makes an otherwise good shot into something that little bit special."

Congratulations to John, who wins a copy of *Taking Flight* by Michael Warren.

• **Turn to page 72 to find out about this month's photo challenge.**



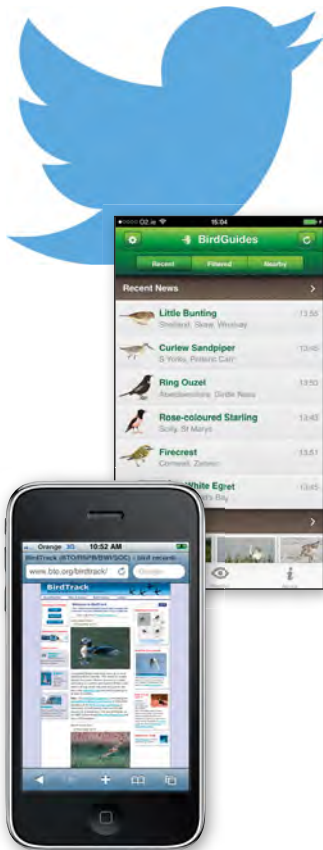
LUCY MCROBERT

Generation gap

Tensions between young and old birders can be strained, notes **Lucy McRobert**. But instead of arguing, surely we should be forging links between the generations.

“That’s the duty of the old ... to be anxious on the behalf of the young. And the duty of the young is to scorn the anxiety of the old”

Philip Pullman 1995



Twitter, birding apps and smartphones allow constant online access, adding much to birding in the process, but the use of modern technology can also underline the differences between younger and older birders.

Inter-generational conflicts are nothing new. Each generation strives to separate themselves from the one before by forming their own identity: musically, artistically, politically – or in this case, in birding.

Young birders today have tools at their disposal that previous generations could only have dreamed of: social media, apps, instant bird news, smartphones, BirdTrack and more. However, these have proved a double-edged sword in developing the ambitions and skills of upcoming young birders – and defined relationships between generations.

Some of these interactions are excellent: at the British Trust for Ornithology Annual Conference in December, six young birders explained to a packed auditorium what it was that inspired them, from patch birding to ringing, and nest recording to art and photography. Blogging and social media were key to sharing their passion for wildlife, as was the necessity of strong inter-generational links – mentoring – founded on respect and patience.

At the other end of the scale, there have been several instances where disputes between generations have become belligerent and petty.

Some experienced birders condemn young whippersnappers for ‘running before they can walk’: seeing White-throated Needletail before they’ve seen Garden Warbler, or Great Spotted before Common Cuckoo. It seems wrong and appears to undermine the many years spent learning the basics before moving on to the rare.

Some young birders, affronted by this perceived lack of support, respond with sarcasm, arrogance and sometimes even aggression. More dive in on all sides and social media warfare ensues. A lot of the dialogue doesn’t even relate to birding: more playground name-calling, even cyber-bullying, on both sides.

Several middle-aged birders recall their first memories as being with the Young Ornithologists’ Club or local RSPB groups. They explored new species with older birders (which can be frowned upon nowadays) and

thus served an ‘apprenticeship’. Telephone grapevines to pass on information acted in place of Twitter. They weren’t able to head to the internet afterwards to document their experiences publically.

On the net

Online networks of young birders have been a shining light in building self-esteem, skills and friendships among an upcoming generation of naturalists, especially at a time when so many lament the lack of young blood in bird clubs and fear befriending younger mentees. They encourage joining local groups, the use of BirdTrack and the submission of records: all positive steps.

But these achievements also come with risks: different locations, styles of birding and accomplishments become fashionable among the young, which can cause conflict with birders who treasure their personal long-standing traditions. Competitive egos, combined with online anonymity and a thirst to prove skills, can result in aggravating situations.

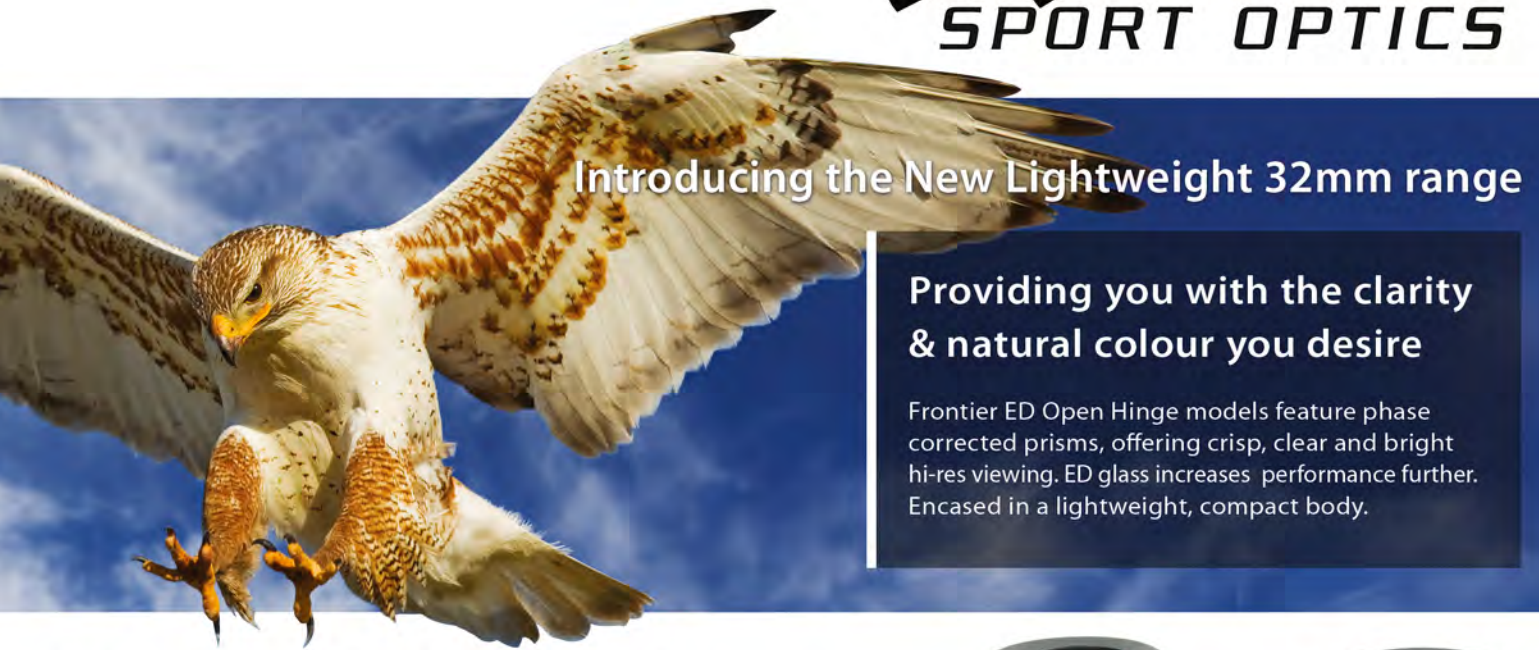
It’s easy to blame young’uns for the technologies that they have at their disposal, but this isn’t a reason to berate them. The difficulty in forming inter-generational links in the present day makes the transfer of skills hard, so if you see an example of poor field craft, speak up: don’t take a photograph with the view to humiliating someone on Twitter!

In return, younger birders need to recognise that it takes years to build up a reputation in something as passionate and competitive as birding, and not react badly to words of wisdom. No one knows it all, but there’s no substitute for experience. The quieter majority of birders – young, old and somewhere in between – want to support each other, but a vocal few allow bad language and a defensive attitude to dominate. It’s a shame, because when it comes to it, aren’t we all in it for the birds? ■

Lucy McRobert returns in the May issue.

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